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cover illustration

Rote Sonne (Rudolf Thome, 1969).

Picture courtesy: Rudolf Thome.

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Between the Young and the New: pop sensibilities and laconic style in Rudolf Thome's *Rote Sonne*

JOHANNES VON MOLTKE

'Young German cinema is boring'

In the hundred-year history of German cinema, few landmarks stand out as clearly as the Oberhausen Manifesto of 1962. This year marks a watershed in the standard historiographical narrative of the development of German film: after the glory of Weimar art cinema and its subsequent descent along a trajectory leading, in Siegfried Kracauer's terms, 'from Caligari to Hitler', filmmaking in Germany seems to enter a long period of dormancy throughout the Nazi years and their continuation into the 1950s – interrupted only by the dim and passing promise of a new beginning with the *Trümmerfilme* (rubble films) and the founding of DEFA in the late 1940s. Against this background, as well as the more immediate and explicit sense of a perpetual *Filmkrise* throughout the 1950s, the collective intervention by twenty-six young filmmakers at the Oberhausen Short Film Festival entered German film history as the crucial turning point for a parochial German cinema on its way back to international recognition and aesthetic respectability, and to providing a serious collective critical voice.

This mythologization of Oberhausen as a point of origin certainly contains more than a kernel of truth: at least retrospectively, it is quite evident that the publication of the manifesto and especially the institutional and personal initiatives that backed it up, produced an unprecedented situation for German filmmaking. Among the

repercussions from the 'Oberhausen moment' are the institutionalization of a unique system of film subsidy, the founding of crucial film-cultural facilities (for example, the film schools in Munich and Berlin and the Berlin *Kinemathek*), and the gradual recognition of a national *Autorenkino* both at home and abroad.

On the other hand, the almost obsessive fixation on Oberhausen as the wellspring of a rejuvenated German cinema has problematic implications for questions of periodization and canonization. Not only is there the issue, raised insistently by Eric Rentschler over a decade ago, of the historical background of the manifesto itself, and the continuities that this new 'zero hour' of German filmmaking supposedly eclipses,¹ but there is also the problem of Oberhausen's apparent inclusiveness as a blanket reference for all German cinema that comes after it. To claim, for example, that the manifesto has 'remained the Magna Carta of the young German cinema' into the early 1980s, or to still view it as *Ausgangspunkt des Gegenwartskinos* (point of departure for the cinema of today) in 1992,² tends to elide both diachronic and synchronic differentiations. Neither has there been any sustained effort to determine whether the Oberhausen moment, however we define it, has come to an end and what kinds of turning points, if any, mark the advent of post-Oberhausen German film. Thus, surprisingly few people have asked how 1989 has forced us to reconsider the German cinematic landscape, or whether the reference to Oberhausen has been superseded by other periodizing markers under which we should be grouping the output of the German film industry – for example, the return to genre filmmaking in the 1990s (one is reminded that an earlier decade of filmmaking, the 1950s, has occasionally been rubricized under a single genre-heading: the *Heimatfilm*), the GATT negotiations which galvanized European filmmakers to form new strategic allegiances, or the ongoing process of European unification more generally. Nor does the very notion of a 'New German Cinema' necessarily allow for sufficient internal differentiations. Particularly in the patterns of its US reception, the celebration of a handful of directors has tended to hide the fact that Oberhausen was (and continues to be) a much disputed point of reference. Ever since US film critics excitedly announced, 'The Germans are coming, the Germans are coming!', it would seem as though there has been no turning back: after Oberhausen, Germany's cinema steered a straight course towards international success through the 1970s, or so the mythology would have it.

For this reason, it still comes as something of a surprise to find an article in the September 1967 issue of *twen* – a seismograph for trends in youth culture – heralding the inanity of Oberhausen filmmaking under the headline, 'Der junge deutsche Film ist ~~langweilig~~ doof' (Young German Cinema is ~~boring~~ stupid).³ Here, the well-known publicist Joe Hembus, a lifelong supporter of most

1 Eric Rentschler, *West German Film in the Course of Time* (New York: Redgrave, 1984).

2 Peter Jansen, 'Zwanzig Jahre später', *Epd Kirche und Film*, no. 4 (1982), p. 5.

3 Joe Hembus, 'Der junge deutsche Film ist ~~langweilig~~ doof', *twen*, vol. 7, no. 9 (1967).

things 'new' in German Cinema, argues that the Young German Cinema of the Oberhauseners has entered into a 'war on two fronts: Opa's Kino still ridicules them as "Bubi's Kino", whereas the up and coming forces already laugh at them as ageing warriors'. From the point of view of this new generation of *Jüngstfilmer* (among them Eckhart Schmidt, Roger Fritz, Klaus Lemke, May Spils and actresses Monika Zinnenberg and Helga Anders), whose unconventional approach to filmmaking Hembus discusses in his article, the Oberhauseners themselves have ended up making *Väterkino*.

Who were these *Jüngstfilmer*, and how did their critique of the first Oberhausen generation play itself out in their films? In an effort to reconstruct what might be considered an intermediate stage between the Young German Cinema of the 1960s and the internationally renowned New German Cinema of the 1970s, this article takes a look at an exemplary film coming out of a group of filmmakers which gained a certain notoriety in the late 1960s as the *Neue Münchner Gruppe* (a name coined by Enno Patalas in the pages of *Filmkritik* in 1966). It is a group that defined itself in opposition to the signatories of the manifesto, locating the 'fathers' who need to be replaced in the early to mid 1960s, as opposed to the golden years of 'Papas Kino' in the 1950s, which had constituted the Oberhauseners' nemesis. The critique of Oberhausen as a signifier for film politics and funding, for group identity, and for a certain approach to filmmaking turns out to be seminal for the formation of this group, both in terms of their films and their writings. Rotating through each others' projects as directors, producers, actors or cameramen, they stage their early films (as well as their reviews) as an uprising against the allegedly established style of the Oberhauseners. Thus Rudolf Thome, asked recently about the way his feature films *Detektive* (1968) and *Rote Sonne* (1969) relate to the Young German Cinema, retorts:

Their relationship to the Oberhausen movement? These films were made against it, they were really consciously made against those other films. What the established Young German Cinema of the Oberhausen signatories wanted to do was to make socially critical, political films. We wanted cinema. . . . We stood in opposition to the Oberhausen filmmakers.⁴

And Thome's colleague Klaus Lemke rhetorically asks 'what distinguishes our kind of filmmaking from the Jungfilmer-productions? – We're simply fifty years younger!'⁵

While this kind of rhetorical posturing usefully exaggerates some film-historical lines of differentiation that I want to follow in the present context, it hardly amounts to any kind of evidence in the absence of a discussion of the *Jüngstfilmer*'s own productions. For this purpose, I want to turn to the work of Rudolf Thome as an example of a particular style of filmmaking that remains poised

4 25 Jahre Rudolf Thomes *Rote Sonne*, Press Kit (Berlin: Prometheus, 1997), p. 17.

5 Quoted in Thomas Brandlmeier, 'Die Münchner Schule: zur Vorgeschichte des jungen deutschen Films 1962–1968', in Hilmar Hoffmann and Walter Schobert (eds), *Abschied vom Gestern: Bundesdeutscher Film der sechziger Jahre* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1991), p. 60.

6 Thomas Elsaesser, 'A retrospect of the New German Cinema', *German Life and Letters*, vol. 41, no. 3 (1988), p. 277.

between the early successes of Oberhausen and the canonized works of the New German Cinema's most famous *Autoren*. To the extent that the films of Thome and the New Munich Group actually facilitate the transition from the Young German Cinema to the era of Fassbinder, Herzog and Wenders – by whom they would be permanently eclipsed – the film-historical function of these *Jüngstfilmer* becomes that of a catalyst or 'vanishing mediator', consumed and obliterated in the very process they enable. In this sense, these films are indeed emblematic of the transitional moment whose precarious historiographical position Thomas Elsaesser describes as follows: 'Renaming the Young [German Cinema] "New" was tantamount to . . . rewriting the effervescent if more uncertain (in the light of the successes of the 1970s) films of 1965–1968, indeed writing them off as a false start'.⁶ While this would certainly be reason enough to take another look at this brief moment of German film after Oberhausen, my purpose here goes beyond simply reconstructing the hidden 'influences' that shaped early Fassbinder, or Wenders. Though Thome may deny the social and political import of his own approach to filmmaking, we can detect in the laconic style of a film like *Rote Sonne* a specific kind of 'pop' sensibility that links it in important, though mediated ways to the social and cultural terrain of the 1960s, even as it prepares the ground for the German cinema of the following decade. This sensibility, I suggest, manifests itself particularly in the laconic narrational and stylistic strategies of the New Munich films, as well as in the equally laconic performances of masculinity, whose latent masochism provocatively invokes and undoes some of the Oedipal assumptions of a classical Hollywood paradigm.

Baby, you can drive my car

Over three decades and a number of re-releases after its premiere, Rudolf Thome's 1969 film *Rote Sonne* reads like a veritable palimpsest of the 1960s: it evokes Pop Art as much as Woodstock, Godard as much as Bogart, and it resonates with distinct, if sometimes ironic, echoes of both the student and the women's movements. The basic conceit of the film is simple enough: four young women have decided to kill any man with whom they remain together for more than five days – 'after all, they deserve it', explains one of the characters. The plot follows the murderous designs of the women from the point at which Thomas (Marquard Böhm) hitchhikes his way into town, finds Peggy (Uschi Obermeier) in a bar and returns with her to the apartment which she shares with the other women. As the days go by, Peggy becomes reluctant to do away with Thomas but is pressured by her housemates to proceed according to the agreement. Thomas gradually realizes what is going



Picture courtesy:
Rudolf Thome.

on (as does the spectator, though always ahead of Thomas), and half-heartedly tries to dissuade the women from going through with their plan. Despite occasional resistance by one of the women, however, the group has decided not to let feelings interfere with their principled procedure, and so the two leading characters end up at the Starnberger See where they almost lyrically kill each other in a highly stylized shoot-out as the red sun comes up over the lake.

When *Rote Sonne* premiered in 1969, Wim Wenders wrote a euphoric review in *Filmkritik* that has accompanied the subsequent re-releases of the film like a seal of quality. Under the title 'Baby, you can drive my car (and maybe I'll love you)', he sings the praises of Thome's stylistic 'take', playing on the double meaning of the German term *Einstellung* as both an attitude or stance and a cinematographic unit:

Rote Sonne is one of those very rare European films that don't simply try to imitate American cinema (and end up demonstrating that they should really have been made in New York starring Humphrey Bogart), but have rather taken their *stance* (*Haltung*) from American films: one of quietly and unobtrusively spreading

7 Wim Wenders, 'Baby, you can drive my car', *Filmkritik*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1970), p. 9.

8 Gerd Gemünden, *Framed Visions: Popular Culture, Americanization, and the Contemporary German and Austrian Imagination* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

out the surface of their world for 90 minutes and nothing else. This *attitude* (*Einstellung*) is visible in every frame of this film.⁷

In its celebration of 'surface', Wenders's review not only situates Thome's film within a discourse on Americanization and on popular culture; he also provides important clues regarding the significance of *Rote Sonne* in terms of the cinematic language of German film at the time. As a film that moves beyond mere 'imitation' of US models on the one hand, and which on the other apparently refuses to transport any of the hermeneutic or cinematographic 'depth' that we readily attribute to the art cinema, *Rote Sonne* does indeed mark a filmic 'stance' (*Haltung*) that is worth looking at more closely. As Gerd Gemünden has recently pointed out, this privileging of 'surface' was a significant gesture in the late 1960s, marking a particular generational position at the intersection of avant-garde and popular (which in most cases meant 'Americanized') cultural practice. Writers like Yaak Karsunke, Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, Peter Handke, Wolf Wondratschek and Elfriede Jelinek set out to challenge what they perceived as the elitism and esotericism of high modernism by insisting on the sensual surfaces of things and their translation into radically descriptive forms of prose and lyric. As Gemünden's detailed case studies suggest, the driving forces behind this cultural paradigm turn out again and again to be of American derivation – whether the paintings of Edward Hopper, the pop art of Andy Warhol or Hollywood cinema and American popular culture more generally.⁸ As I hope to show, the aesthetics of the New Munich Group clearly belong in this historical and cultural context, which indeed they helped to prepare. I thus take Wenders's review as my starting point because I consider its terms not only symptomatic but ultimately also quite concise in their explanation of how *Rote Sonne* is constructed. It is, of course, no accident that the language (or *Haltung*) of the review betrays a certain kinship with the 'stance' of the film it celebrates: Wenders's enthusiasm for Thome's style stems at least in part from a vaguely shared Munich background as filmmakers and critics which retrospectively might account for the rather unselfconscious tone of Wenders's review. As in a number of other 'sensibilist' reviews that appeared in *Filmkritik* at the time, this is an inner-circle discourse of insiders speaking to one another; the shared code and commonly accepted values (the valuation of 'surface' being one of them) are so firmly established among the interlocutors as to make any explanatory rhetoric (such as outside reference to broader cultural codes) superfluous. However, this somewhat tautological relationship between the film and its critic does not invalidate the central trope which both put forward. I would suggest, in other words, that it is indeed possible and productive to organize the film's various aesthetic strategies around its 'undialectical' treatment of surface, and I take the emphasis on

'surfaces' to provide a key to Thome's signifying practices both in *Rote Sonne* and elsewhere. In order to unpack the central metaphor of Wenders's and others' contemporary 'sensibilist' critiques, then, we need to consider what exactly it might mean for a film to 'unobtrusively spread out the surface of its world'.

Laconic narration

For all its laconic understatement, the aforementioned explanation for the women's murderous gender politics – namely that the men 'deserve it' – certainly has a referential ring to it in the context of the 1960s. To take only the most literal example, Valerie Solanas's SCUM Manifesto had only recently been translated and published in Germany, and has been acknowledged by Thome as a relevant intertext for his film. On a more metaphorical level, the women's plot could also be read in reference to the then recent beginnings of the new feminist movement in Germany at an SDS conference in Frankfurt, where one of the slogans had been, 'befreit die sozialistischen Eminenzen von ihren bürgerlichen Schwänzen!' (liberate the socialist luminaries of their bourgeois dicks!). A number of contemporary reviews suggest that these oblique references were indeed available at the time, and that viewers at some level did pick up on them: Klaus Bädckerl, for example, finds that 'the emancipation of these girls lies . . . in the fact that, like Valerie Solanas in her SCUM manifesto, they resist male logics'; another reviewer agrees that '*Rote Sonne* makes one think of emancipation, though it is never mentioned [in the film]', and Friedrich Luft, while critical of the 'cinematic coercion' exerted by the film on its (presumably male?) viewers, similarly suspects that 'with this malicious invention of women's emancipation, Rudolf Thome is seconding "Womans lib" [sic]'.⁹

In this sense, it would be wrong to suggest, as one reviewer did at the time, that *Rote Sonne* presents us with a 'vacuum, in which you are left with only the film and no marks of reality'.¹⁰ It would be equally misleading, however, to insist on reading *Rote Sonne* referentially as an 'anticipation of the extraparlimentary opposition [APO]', as a somewhat more recent viewer has suggested.¹¹ Instead, perhaps the best description of the film's mode of historical referentiality has been offered by Peter Körte, who now views it as a 'time capsule . . . a precise expression of the sixties'.¹² However, this statement differs from contemporary reviews in that it benefits from the hindsight (and the retro-fashions) of the 1990s, suggesting that we be careful not to misconstrue its praise of Thome's 'precision' as an unproblematic form of documentary referentiality. Indeed, I would suggest that such referential readings as may be constructed – usually with hindsight – are clearly *not* favoured by the film itself,

9 All reprinted in *25 Jahre Rudolf Thome's Rote Sonne*, pp. 28ff.

10 Ibid., p. 37.

11 Ulrich Kurowski, 'Sind die wilden Jahre vorbei?', *Epd Kirche und Film*, vol. 29, no. 11 (1973), p. 9.

12 Helmut Böttiger and Peter Körte, 'Ich glaube nicht, daß der Film jemals richtig eingeschätzt wurde', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 21 September 1994.

13 Frieda Grafe, one of the few women writing on film in the major journals and papers at the time, strongly insists on this reading in her review for *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 27 February 1971: 'Looked at closely, this film is a pure male fantasy. ... To let the girls play the [male part] is an endearing trick, much like children singing in the dark. The unknown is domesticated by making it the same.' Reprinted in *25 Jahre Rudolf Thomes Rote Sonne*, pp. 50ff.

which significantly transforms contemporary cultural intertexts in at least two ways as it integrates them into its narrative: on the one hand, *Rote Sonne* is anything *but* a feminist manifesto, ultimately remaining at least as interested in the fate of a central male protagonist as in the fashionable female guerilla. In this sense, the film reads more like a masochistic male fantasy¹³ than a feminist manifesto – a distinction that would be born out by a comparison of the laconic rationale offered by *Rote Sonne* for the women's decision to take action with Helke Sanders's use of documentary footage of her own famous speech at the 1968 SDS conference in *Der Subjektive Faktor/The Subjective Factor* (1981).

Such a comparison would also point to a second transformation of the feminist 'pretext' in Thome's film, which I locate on the stylistic level: whereas Sanders carefully layers historical references, authorial commentary and semi-fictional situations, *Rote Sonne* follows a minimalist logic in terms of narrative and style. Like many other films written by Max Zihlmann and/or directed by Rudolf Thome, *Rote Sonne* is characterized by a strong *laconism*, a refusal to dwell upon, or in any way embellish, a point once it has been made. Through the film's paratactic narration, we are presented with a highly contrived piece of fiction as though it were the most banal and ordinary of occurrences. This stylistic economy defines Zihlmann's script with its stylized dialogues as much as the film's unspectacular cinematography, the numerous *temps mortes* without much action or dialogue, or the casual introduction of the characters (I will return to these points in more detail below) – and it is recognizable even in the basic plot structure whose premiss turns out to be as simple as it is baffling.

The construction of an early scene, in which we see the four women kill a man for the first time, neatly encapsulates the film's pervasive laconism. Isolde is apparently reluctant to do away with Howard ('Isolde macht Schwierigkeiten' [Isolde is causing trouble]), so Sylvie comes to wake Peggy, who is in bed with Thomas. The four women convene almost wordlessly in an adjoining room, where the camera briefly focuses on each face in closeup; Peggy tells Isolde to 'sei vernünftig' (be sensible), and then the four of them move on to a locked door, behind which we find Howard, gagged and bound to a chair.

Peggy casually assembles a muffled pistol in front of Howard and hands it to Isolde. The camera cuts to a closeup of Howard from Isolde's point of view, in which the man simply returns her gaze impassively. Isolde shakes her head, gives the pistol to Peggy, who shoots Howard in the head with a brief click, while the camera shows Isolde's faintly disgusted reaction. Peggy disassembles the gun, walks across the room (with Howard still bound to the chair in the background) and, after a brief exchange with Christine about how best to dispose of the corpse – Christine: 'I think we'll need the

Picture courtesy:
Rudolf Thome.



VW'; Peggy: 'It's best if you take him to the swamp in Dachau again' – returns to bed to frolic with Thomas.

The point is not only that the narrative refuses to delve into character psychology in a situation ostensibly full of psychological drama, but that the camera registers that situation itself as though these women routinely get up in the mornings to get rid of men, assembling and disassembling muffled guns the way others brush their teeth. Neither the editing nor the use of music or any fancy camera movements work to emphasize the intensity of the scene. Instead, its slow, steady rhythm, which leaves ample room for the characters to perform in ways that are not immediately relevant to the progression of the plot, suggests an attitude of patient (though by no means impartial) observation. For a film that has variously been categorized as a 'fairy tale', a 'total adventure film' and as 'strange, utopian, one of the few science fiction films',¹⁴ *Rote Sonne* treats its own plot in a surprisingly casual and unspectacular manner which Thome himself has described in terms of a documentary approach:

The fact that girls kill men is as much of a conceit, a fiction as are [the science-fictional plots of] *Supergirl* or *Galaxis*. And the documentary aspect lies in the fact that it was incredibly important to me to narrate this rather improbable story quite normally and realistically and casually, just as if these were things that occurred every day.¹⁵

Here, Thome pinpoints a split between the story and its treatment, a split which one might choose to discuss in terms of the division of labour (contrary to the reigning ideology of the *Autorenfilm* at the time) between the scriptwriter Zihlmann and the director Thome.

14 For example, Wolf Donner, 'Richtig schönes Kino: der Filmemacher Rudolf Thome', *Die Zeit*, 19 March 1971.

15 'Aus einem Gespräch mit Rudolf Thome', in Wilhelm Roth (ed.), *Retrospektive Karin und Rudolf Thome* (Berlin: Freunde der deutschen Kinemathek, 1973), pp. 21ff.

Picture courtesy:
Rudolf Thome.



- 16 [The *metteur-en-scène* ... is the gentleman who adds the pictures to [the scenario]. François Truffaut, 'A certain tendency of the French cinema' in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods* vol. I (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), p. 232. 'It is the director who bears the responsibility for the whole, including all its parts that's *Autorenkino*' Edgar Reitz, 'Das Kino der Autoren lebt', in *Liebe zum Kino* (Köln: Verlag Köln, 1983), p. 120
- 17 Norbert Grob, 'Aulenthalt an der Grenze', *Medium*, vol. 9, no. 12 (1979)

- 18 Böttiger and Körte, "Ich glaube nicht"

whose role we would have to situate somewhere between Truffaut's *metteur en scène* and Reitz's autocratic *Autor*.¹⁶ Where Zihlmann's script generates highly stylized fictional situations, Thome films them as though they were everyday occurrences. Indeed, Thome himself has repeatedly pointed out the 'artful and extremely stylized' form of Zihlmann's storylines and dialogues which contrast with his own approach as a director involved in a 'documentary' mode of filmmaking: 'I actually had the feeling and was conscious of the fact that I was making a documentary about actors who are playing a script by Max Zihlmann'.¹⁷

Without wanting to generate the impression that the director is necessarily (or even ever) the best reader of her/his own films, I would suggest that in this case, Thome's stated ('conscious') intentions correlate with the formal structure of the finished product. For it is precisely this tension between a highly fictionalized situation and its often quasi-documentary treatment that accounts for the effectiveness of the film. The question remains, though, how we might back up statements such as Thome's analytically rather than by reference to auteurial intentions or first impressions. Thome himself has claimed – rightfully, I would suggest – that 'the film has never been adequately evaluated in terms of its aesthetics. After all, the things that go on in this film are not real, it's quite a strange in-between world (*Zwischenwelt*). It is precisely the generation of this 'in-between world' that my analysis aims to describe.¹⁸ In other words: by which formal means does a film like *Rote Sonne* manage to create and sustain its 'laconic style'?

As I argue in more detail below, Thome achieves this effect

19 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), esp. ch. 4.

20 Donner, 'Richtig schönes Kino'.

through cinematography and character treatment, but its laconic stance can also be traced in the way it deals out narrative information. In the terminology proposed by David Bordwell for the analysis of filmic narration, I am labeling the 'tactics of syuzhet construction' in *Rote Sonne* laconic because of the film's refusal to share with the viewer more narrative information than necessary to establish its fictional world.¹⁹ Thus, although the narration is highly straightforward, even 'communicative', regarding the basic premiss of the plot (the women's murderous gender politics), when it comes to 'explaining' the action, constructing psychologically 'round' characters, or outlining these characters' 'aims', *Rote Sonne* displays a general dearth of motivation; it is, in Bordwell's terms, relatively 'uncommunicative'. We never learn what brings Thomas to Munich, for instance; there is no coherent 'argument' for the decision to kill men; and the fact that the police might be investigating the murders is never even raised as a possible aspect to be pursued by the narrative (or the spectator, for that matter). As Wolf Donner rightly puts it, 'the founding gesture of these characters, as of the films themselves, is *understatement* . . . the casual display of the unusual'.²⁰

The causally 'loose' story is hardly designed to generate any significant form of *narrative* suspense: though *Rote Sonne* (like *Detektive* and *48 Stunden bis Acapulco* [Klaus Lemke, 1967] before it) obviously borrows thriller, crime, or mystery elements from US genre formulae, its narration is never organized in a way that would engage the film's spectator in solving a case, unravelling a thrill, or awaiting the punishment of a crime. In this sense, Thome might be said to copy the copy, borrowing not only directly from Hawks or Walsh, as he himself has claimed, but also from Godard's or Melville's appropriations of the American B-picture. As in *A Bout de Souffle/Breathless* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1959), for instance, Thome's spectator is kept abreast with the development of the plot in a way that leaves few, if any, enigmas. If *Rote Sonne* nonetheless is able to generate and sustain a remarkable tension in terms of spectatorial investment in the image (in other words, if it is not simply boring), this has to do precisely with what I have been describing as the film's laconic style.

Incidentally, one measure of the effectiveness of this style might be found in the deliberations of the Film Rating Board (*Filmbewertungsstelle*, or FBW), which initially refused to grant *Rote Sonne* any *Prädikat*, or quality rating (against recommendations by Wim Wenders and Jean-Claude Biette of the *Cahiers du cinéma*). Specifically, the FBW objected to the ambiguity, within *Rote Sonne*, between extreme stylization and 'irreality' on the one hand and the tendency toward 'realism' on the other – 'stylization and realism collide throughout the film,' as the board puts it. In addition to pinpointing a guiding aesthetic principle of Thome's film, the board's explicit critique of such 'collision' also betrays its own normative

²¹ 'Begründung des Bewertungsausschusses der FBW für die Nichterteilung eines Prädikats', 14 November 1969; quoted from *25 Jahre Rudolf Thome's Rote Sonne*, p. 21.

²² 'Widerspruch von Enno Patalas', 28 November 1969; quoted from *ibid.*, p. 22.

aesthetics which are formulated explicitly in the objection that 'there is not the slightest trace of a "social background" which might provide the premiss for the girls' action'.²¹ As Enno Patalas rightly insisted at the time, this standard of verisimilitude by which the board chooses to judge the 'collision' of different aesthetic strategies (their insistence on the 'realistic' motivation of fictional elements) blinds the FBW to its own insights. In his intervention on Thome's and Zihlmann's behalf, which eventually helped to overturn the decision, Patalas consequently notes: 'the fact that "collisions" of heterogeneous stylistic aspects might constitute a stylistic principle in its own right (and indeed *are* an important principle of modern art) obviously escapes the committee'.²² Rather than measuring the film by rigid standards of realism, then, it is important to recognize to what degree the laconic treatment of such questions as character psychology, referential realism, or 'social background' enables a film like *Rote Sonne* to generate its own stylistic economy in the first place.

Flat images: a cinematography of surfaces

In this respect, we can now see how it might make sense to speak of *Rote Sonne* and similar films as 'spreading out the surface of their worlds': the particular stance or attitude of such films turns on their refusal to pursue questions of motivation, psychology, social realism or history. By 'documenting' the way in which its own generic or contrived plot unfolds, *Rote Sonne* (but also *Detektive*, *Supergirl* [1970–71] or *48 Stunden bis Acapulco*) demonstrates the strictly economical narrative style whose avoidance of any informational redundancy I call laconic. In addition to the organization of the plot, however, there are at least two further aspects of filmic signification which buttress this narrative economy and thereby contribute significantly to the effectiveness of this 'superficial' aesthetics. Thus, if we look at Thome's cinematography, a film like *Rote Sonne* pays attention to surfaces in a rather literal sense: in what is perhaps the film's defining aesthetic gesture (its 'dominant' in neoformalist terms), we are presented over and over again with 'flat' images that frame the characters at medium distance against monochrome walls.

With relatively few camera movements and a limited variety of camera angles and distances, the cinematography of *Rote Sonne* serves to maintain a sense of cinematic space that refuses to operate with any significant depth of field. Accordingly, the camerawork and mise-en-scene for the film are as economical as its narration and dialogue. The apartment which constitutes a kind of 'home base' for the comings and goings of the characters in an oddly stylized Munich, for example, is treated in a strictly functional, though aesthetically intriguing, way: with few furnishings, it neither serves

23 In his history of film style, Bordwell discusses the 'mug-shot option' as a 'secondary norm' in the history of staging in depth. His discussion of this norm is useful in further specifying what I mean by a laconic style: 'While signalling the resolutely nonmainstream film, the perpendicular schema suits a dedramatized narrative. Resisting camera movement and scaling down figure action, such shots can create a scene of stillness, even serenity. . . . When stripped down to a few starkly outlined elements, the mug-shot staging can repudiate the busy *mise-en-scène* of Hollywood in the name of simplicity.' David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 262ff.

24 Wenders, 'Baby you can drive my car', p. 9;

25 Donner, 'Richtig schönes Kino'.

to characterize its inhabitants, nor does it invite any intricate deep-focus cinematography, since there are few objects that would help to mark different planes of the image for the viewer's gaze. Instead, characters are presented against the backdrop of the green, red or orange walls in framings vaguely reminiscent of mug-shots.²³ In other words, Thome's cinematography, his use of the camera for creating striking 'takes' without depth, remains committed to 'spreading out the surface' of the profilmic space. This technique leads Wenders to compare the images of Thome's film with the aesthetics of a cartoon strip. In his review he speaks of the 'strange colourlessness of the colours which is exactly the same as in Mickey Mouse comic books: nobody would be surprised if the walls which had still been yellow just a moment earlier were suddenly blue – things like this can happen.'²⁴ Whether purposefully or not, there are even cuts on action which would suggest continuity, but then suddenly transport us to a different room: as Peggy brings breakfast to Thomas in bed, she opens the door to a room with green walls, but when she puts down the tray in front of Thomas after a cut, the walls are yellow. Wolf Donner consequently compares Thome's sets with those of Godard's films of the 1960s:

rather empty, light, full of effective colours. In these sets, the characters often have a flat, plane quality [*etwas Planes, Plakatives*], and at the same time, these backgrounds and the unobtrusive camera direct our attention to every little detail: gestures, attitudes, a sentence, a laughter, a gaze are suddenly of utmost importance and can become an event.²⁵

The recurrence of this trope of pure surface without depth is at once symptomatic of the critical discourse that accompanies the New Munich Group and provides a useful organizing concept for the analysis of an individual film such as *Rote Sonne*. But where I have been arguing on the level of the film's narration and its cinematographic treatment of spatial relations, Donner's remark now suggests that we also look for the staging of the superficial in terms of character treatment.

'Ein gewisser kaputter Charme': performative resistance

Regarding the function of character in *Rote Sonne*, the reference to Godard is as apposite as it is with respect to the similar use of cinematography and *mise-en-scène*. For a figure like Thomas not only 'cites' the protagonists of *A Bout de Souffle* or *Pierrot le Fou* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965) – in terms both of the shifty characters and of the way they are played by Bohm and Jean-Paul Belmondo, respectively – more to the point, like Michel Poiccard in *A Bout de Souffle*, many of the characters that Bohm plays around the time of

Rote Sonne are conceived 'citationally' from the start, and his acting only serves to underscore this point. Thus, where the character of Poiccard is designed to quote the hard-boiled detective of the film noir and Belmondo notoriously imitates Humphrey Bogart (whose photograph he discovers in a cinema window), the figure of Thomas iterates this process: and he, too, displays traits of the 'shabby, obsessively lonely hero' of the noir thriller. In addition, when he nonchalantly drives a VW beetle into the Starnberg lake, tests the water temperature without getting out, and reverses back onto the shore, Thomas's actions directly quote Belmondo as Pierrot le Fou (only to be taken up yet again, seven years later, in Wim Wenders's *Im Lauf der Zeit/Kings of the Road*, which opens famously with a scene in which Hanns Zischler speeds headlong into a lake in his VW). Other roles played by Bohm, such as Andy in *Detektive*, or 'Kid' in Roland Klick's Western *Deadlock* (1970), where both the characters and the plots are recognizably generic, emphasize this citational aspect. Like *48 Stunden bis Acapulco*, these films explicitly take up Hollywood formats (the thriller, the Western); the highly stylized treatment of those generic templates, however, generates the impression that these templates and their attendant assumptions about gender identity are not so much fulfilled but rather become the object of citation and, more importantly, commentary. By virtue of the fact that these films seem continuously to reflect on their own generic mode of construction, the fictional characters, too, are revealed as intertextual constructs. Consequently, these characters seem to move in a citational universe in which their existence is always already defined as playing a role created elsewhere.

In the case of *Rote Sonne*, this citational construction of character turns on Bohm's enactment of Thomas as a latter-day tough guy born out of starring roles in Hollywood's 'male' genres. Though in no sense a Western hero or a hardboiled detective, Thomas is characterized by the same kind of laconic, self-sufficient narcissism – 'ein gewisser kaputter Charme' (a certain, beat-up charm), as he himself puts it near the end of the film – that typically shields many of these characters from emotional engagement (though not necessarily from physical injury or, more likely, death). The characteristic nonchalance of the tough male is quickly established in the first two scenes of the film, which starts with Thomas waking up in the back of Mercedes on his way to Munich. When the driver expresses annoyance at the hitchhiker for having slept for hours rather than keeping him company, Thomas merely asks for a cigarette and a light, passively refusing to live up to the driver's expectations. Eventually, he insists on being dropped off at a Munich club called 'Take Five', causing the increasingly exasperated driver to detour from his route to Salzburg, and even asking him for ten Deutschmarks before he drives off in a huff. The following scene focuses on Thomas's attempts to enter the 'Take Five', where he will

Picture courtesy:
Rudolf Thome.



eventually find Peggy at the bar. The doorman, however, refuses to allow Thomas to enter for lack of the required tie, whereupon Thomas digs for one in his bag, hanging rather than tying it around his neck over an unbuttoned shirt. Again, the doorman does not grant him access; he is powerless, however, when an admitted guest (Howard, the American who will soon become the women's victim) claims that Thomas is in his company. As he enters the club, Thomas ostentatiously points out his makeshift tie to the bewildered doorman.

With his entry into the club, the basic 'traits' that make up the character of Thomas have all been established. With hardly any dialogue, the two opening scenes have managed to outline a character on the fringe of social normativity. Both the exchange with the Mercedes driver and with the doorman (a representative and a guardian of a certain social order, respectively) revolve around Thomas's 'passive aggressive' refusal to play by the rules of communication and social distinction, which he simply disregards in the first scene and treats ironically in the second. With the establishment of his socially deviant status as a *Gammler* (tramp) – a category suggested by the driver, which Thomas neither refuses nor accepts – the film thus lays the groundwork for a character who plays *with* the rules rather than *by* them. Without any pathos or revolutionary zeal, the figure of Thomas casually deconstructs the demands and expectations with which it is confronted. Repeatedly, this occurs through a form of ironic citation, as in the way he wears his tie, or in his 'scientifically' motivated refusal to work (as he explains to Peggy, 'I can't just take any job. Work that collides with

your own rhythm of life can have disastrous consequences for the entire organism').

This approach to character is mirrored, I would argue, in Thome's and his actors' approach to screen performance, which undeniably also has its roots in the Nouvelle Vague. Thus, Thome shares with Godard the willingness to let his actors work in a peculiar mix of 'presentational' and 'representational' forms of acting.²⁶ Though all characters in Thome's film move exclusively within the diegetic world, never transgressing the conventional 'fourth wall' as occurs frequently throughout Godard's work, the ways in which the actors *perform* these characters nonetheless remain highly legible throughout. Details such as Marquard Bohm's diction, his idiosyncratic use of fillers that hardly correspond to any written script, Uschi Obermeier's soft-spoken voice or the post-synchronization of the dialogue combine to generate a fundamentally 'citational' mode of performance: rather than representing fictional characters, the actors in *Rote Sonne* present those characters as fictional constructs which they 'quote' and thereby perform. James Naremore's reading of *A Bout de Souffle* applies here as well. Drawing on Erving Goffman's frame analysis, Naremore finds *A Bout de Souffle* exemplary of a particular 'modernist' approach to acting which,

instead of making a clear demarcation between theatrical and aleatory codes . . . problematizes the relation between actors, roles, and audiences, sometimes confounding the audience's ability to 'frame' or 'key' the action on the screen.²⁷

In terms of spectatorship, this (potential) confusion of 'primary' frames with the specifically 'theatrical' frame²⁸ would mean that at times we cannot distinguish between Marquard Bohm, the actor, and Thomas, the character that he is supposed to be playing. The 'fourth wall' erected by and for the fiction becomes permeable, and our attention shuttles back and forth between the character supposedly enclosed by that wall, and the actor who almost reluctantly enters the (work-)space of the fiction.

In Thome's film, this provocative effect is achieved by two means. On the one hand, he exploits the historically specific function of star images, notoriously underdeveloped in Germany at the time, but nonetheless pertinent to the casting decisions involved in *Rote Sonne*, as well as to the use of actors in other films by Thome, Lemke and Zihlmann. By the time of *Rote Sonne*, Marquard Bohm had already become established as a kind of stock player who – though perhaps not quite yet a 'superstar of the German underground'²⁹ – had indeed begun to develop an intertextual image that suggested a continuity of the actor behind the impersonation of different (or not so different) roles. Uschi Obermeier, on the other hand, had indisputably acquired a star image at the time. Besides presenting her as a model and

26 Cf. James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

27 Ibid., p. 17.

28 Cf. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: an Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

29 25 Jahre Rudolf Thomas *Rote Sonne*, p. 75.

30 Julia Müller, 'Miss Kommune und ihr Leben zu acht', *rwenz*, vol. 9, no. 6 (1969).

31 Cf. John Ellis, 'Stars as a cinematic phenomenon', in *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London and Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982).

32 Rolf Aurich, 'No role, just character: über einige Motive in Filmen von und mit Marquard Böhm', *Filmwärts*, no. 8 (1987), p. 6.

covergirl, the press had by then published significant details of her life that could count as 'private': her beginnings as a secretary, her rapid rise to fame and glamour in the modelling business, and her sudden decision to join the infamous *Kommune 1* in Berlin in 1969. Moreover, this story, which is told as a riches-to-rags tale in *twen* for example,³⁰ clearly resonates with her role in *Rote Sonne*, where she bartends for money at night, but is identified primarily as a key figure in the film's version of a *Kommune*. It was possible and probable, in other words, that the audience would read her performance in a kind of 'feedback loop', characteristic for the reception of star images.³¹

If the recognition of a split between actor and character depends on a particular historical, discursive context on the one hand, I would argue that *Rote Sonne* also cues us to apply varying 'frames' to the act of 'impersonation' on a more formal level. For I take Naremore's point to be that certain approaches to performance (which he labels 'modernist' and I am treating as 'citational') spell out the theatrical frame so clearly that it becomes recognizable and in a sense 'deductible' from the performance text, leaving us to contemplate the work and gestural repertoire of the actor: thus, when Böhm hesitates before completing a sentence or a gesture for a moment longer than the consistency of character or the demands of the plot would seem to require, this 'barring of the device' serves to highlight an underlying gesture of resistance as a corollary to the film's outward laconism. Such lapses, in other words, constitute the defining 'semantic gesture' of Böhm's acting as well as of the film's social commentary as a whole. Both in his spoken lines and perhaps even more so in his minimized gestural repertoire, Böhm works with intermittent 'pauses' which generate a differential between 'acting' and 'not acting', a diacritical opposition between an actor at work on a fictional role and an actor's mere presence in front of the camera. However, in addition to making the split between actor and character legible, these pauses also serve to de-emphasize the act of performing, thereby rendering the performance 'laconic' and again blurring the lines between a seemingly lethargic actor and a fictional character who is practically defined by his resistance to labour. This resistance is tangible even in Böhm's gaze, which rarely meets with his interlocutor's. Not only does this contribute to the 'laconicity' of the film's editing by allowing the film to cut back and forth between characters and preserve the stylized space between them without depending on eyeline matches, Böhm often seems to be 're-citing' his lines to himself, and for the benefit of the audience, moving ambivalently 'in' and 'out' of character. As Rolf Aurich has put it, 'Böhm never seems to be completely convinced by his actions. In most of his performances, we find a latent reservation about what he is currently saying or doing.'³²

This display of laconic performance, I would suggest, constitutes

the third level on which Wenders's notion of *Oberfläche* usefully illuminates the functioning of Thome's film. Through a specific mode of acting which emphasizes the tension between the speaker and the spoken dialogue, between the gestural code of the character and that of the actor, the figures of Thomas, Peggy, Isolde, Christine and Sylvie become constructed 'citationally'. In this sense, Thome's characters disable or, rather, comment upon the dialectics of surface and depth. We do not read the psychological, identity-constituting subtext of the characters, but remain with them at the level of the filmic construction of character itself, which is to say that the film invites us to treat 'identity' as an assemblage of traits which begin to cohere only under the conditions of a given performance. Again, Naremore's reading of the acting in Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* illuminates the performances in *Rote Sonne*, too: having described the way in which Godard's film reverses 'Method' assumptions about the role as an authentic 'expression' of the actor's subjectivity, Naremore concludes that 'instead of treating performance as an outgrowth of an essential self, [Godard's film] implies that the self is an outgrowth of performance'.³³

³³ Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, p. 19.

The politics of the laconic

As I suggest above, Thome's laconic style of narration works with a 'double standard' of verisimilitude, the one generic and the other documentary. It seems to me that to pit the two generic modes against each other as mutually exclusive is to miss the potential of the film; I would disagree, therefore, with Volker Baer's suggestion that 'at best, one can take [this rather contrived story] as a gangster fairy tale, but it certainly contains no critique of the times [*Zeitkritik*]'.³⁴ Where other Young and New German films use documentary methods to link their narratives with contemporary or identifiable historical events, the 'documentary' aspect of Thome's films does not 'authenticate' their plots; rather, the observational camera, the long takes and the laconic rhythm of the editing, as well as the occasional undecidability regarding the actors' performative modes serve here to irritate our perception – including the filmmaker's own – of the films' politics:

A French critic interviewed me in the final stages of completing the film (*Detektive*) and asked me, whether I would ever make a socially critical or political film, and I told him no, I didn't intend to. But now I realize that this film probably wouldn't have been shot the way it now is if it hadn't been for all the events of April and May, the student revolts, and all these things, which have all found their way into the finished film, somehow. . . . The fact that these people [i.e. the characters in the film] simply disregard

³⁴ Volker Baer, 'Ein Beispiel weiblicher Rache', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 21 January 1971.

35 Siegfried Schober, 'Drogen, Filme, Liebe: ein Gespräch mit Rudolf Thome und Max Zihlmann', *Filmkritik*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1969), p. 229.

36 Bühler, 'M • STA 75 • M' in *Filmkritik*, vol. 15, no. 5 (1971), p. 12.

37 Peter Wuss, *Filmanalyse und Psychologie: Strukturen des Films im Wahrnehmungsprozess* (Berlin: Sigma, 1993), p. 124.

certain things and do what they think is right at the moment, whatever comes to mind, and without any further consideration.³⁵

This slippage between a seemingly self-enclosed, hermetic construct and its referential grounding in historical and political discourse, which Thome claims to have recognized only after the fact, is crucial to the function of his early films. Thus, while the referential readings of sociopolitical events or motifs in *Rote Sonne* were available at the time, they do not necessarily constitute a dominant among the reactions of contemporary audiences, if the reviews are any indication. As an article in *Filmkritik* put it,

Watching Thome-Films is to suddenly realize that it's not about solving mental problems, constructing causal connections, sensing the deeper meaning of things etc.; rather, [these films] initially ask of their viewers to simply *learn certain modes of comportment* [*Verhaltensweisen*], to accept them and to recognize them as adequate.³⁶

This notion of reading the film for its *Verhaltensweisen*, I would argue, is central to the politics of Thome's film, which lie not in its referential grounding in any institutionalized, 'leftist' political culture, but rather in the intransigence of its laconic style – which, after all, is not to be confused with simplicity. Rather, the acting, in particular, repeatedly transports a tangible sense of *refusal* – from the very refusal to 'act' described above to a given character's refusal to engage in a form of socially or narratively expected behaviour – blocking the spectator's access not only to redundant information concerning the construction of the narrative, but also to the very notion of interiority.

The politics of this film, then, have as much to do with a perceptual register available to the spectator in the cinema as with any referential grounding in a historical/political moment. Peter Wuss has recently proposed a model of film perception in which to locate what he calls – following a monograph on Antonioni – 'behavioural films' (*Filme der Verhaltensweisen*).³⁷ Following Wuss's terminology, I want to suggest, then, that *Rote Sonne*, as well as most of the films attributed to the New Munich Group, can indeed be described as 'films de comportement' whose loosely structured plots don't emphasize narrative suspense but rather seem to observe the behaviour (*Verhalten*) of their characters. Thus, Wuss introduces this category to describe films that work strongly on a perceptual level, rather than conceptually or through the use of recognizable stereotypes. The often sketchy or rudimentary plots do not engage the spectator in the inference and construction of an 'argument', but rather present her/him with recurring perceptual topoi that are gradually learned and understood in the course of the film. Wuss gives the example of Kaurismäki's *Ariel*, which opens on a number

of disjunctive occurrences in and around a coal mine: someone switches off a light, a door closes, a character named Taisto throws his work-clothes into a garbage can, closes a suitcase and is then shown at a bank where he closes his account. According to Wuss, these moments only begin to cohere for the spectator as she/he gradually recognizes the repeated suggestion of an endpoint to different developments as the underlying topos. Following Mukarovsky, Wuss calls this repeated topos of 'closure' the scene's basic 'semantic gesture'.

One task for film analysis, according to Wuss, must lie in reconstructing the coherence of isolated motifs or occurrences into such 'semantic gestures' which, while often barely recognizable for the spectator on a conscious level, contribute significantly to her/his perception of any given film on the whole. The cognitivist model advanced by Wuss would imply that, together with two other types of 'invariants' which need not concern us here, the reconstruction of these perceptual topics helps to account analytically for the majority of all filmic forms of narration. While I have strong reservations about such universalizing claims and about the cognitivist pretensions to 'scientific' (as opposed to 'naive' and 'primitive') hermeneutics, I find Wuss's analytical model useful in that it suggests a link between the 'semantic gestures' of filmic narration and the ways in which spectators are led to induce behavioural models (*Verhaltensweisen*) from a given narrative. Indeed, one might go one step further and suggest that, if the structure of the film's narrative emphasizes certain behavioural codes without motivating their use within that narrative in terms of character psychology or suspense, then the spectator is likely to look elsewhere for such motivation, beginning to understand and evaluate the relevance of such behaviour beyond its mere diegetic function.

I would propose, then, that in the case of *Rote Sonne*, as well as of other films with Marquard Bohm as lead, it is worth taking the notion of a 'semantic gesture' quite literally, and to enquire into the perceptual function of Bohm's gestural repertoire which coheres around a recurrent trope of laconic refusal: in his numerous 'pauses', Bohm refuses to act, his gaze refuses to meet his interlocutor's, and his casual physical movements refuse to register with the spectator as expressive of anything but a certain degree of resistance to the strictures of both the fictional and the profilmic situation. If we include the dialogue as part of Bohm's gestural code, the recurrent non-sequiturs and the deliberate misunderstandings further suggest that the basic 'semantic gesture' of the film is encapsulated in Bohm's various forms of laconic resistance.

Again, contemporary reviews suggest that this perceptual register, as well as its implicitly political use-value, were indeed available to the audience at the time. Ulrich Kurowski, for instance, makes this link explicit in his suggestion that 'by registering behavioural modes,

38 Kurowski, 'Sind die wilden Jahre vorbei?', p. 10.

39 Kraft Wetzel, 'Der Thomefilm', in Roth (ed.), *Retrospektive Karin und Rudolf Thome*, pp. 23–4.

the director engages in social analysis'.³⁸ And Kraft Wetzel rightly insists that Thome's and Zihlmann's treatment of character 'avoids the commitment to both subjective "depth" and to figures that are objective, i.e. referentially bound to social and political reality'; instead, he argues, Thomas's/Bohm's self-attributed 'battered charm derives from his latent recalcitrance, his non-observance of social rules'.³⁹ It is through the almost parodic citation of these rules that a figure like Bohm suggests their malleability. If the iterative treatment of fictional characters that I described above suggests a fundamentally constructivist notion of identity, then Bohm's 'battered charm' consists in the way his semantic gesture of refusal usefully lays bare the rules that habitually govern the construction of (gendered) identities.

Genre, gender, and the Americanization of the *Autorenfilm*

If the laconic figures that I have been describing call to mind not only characteristic performances of the French nouvelle vague but also some of the petty gangsters of Fassbinder's early films this is surely no coincidence, but rather the consequence of a kindred form of cinephilia that leads Fassbinder to explore the construction of filmic character along similar generic lines to Thome or Lemke. Indeed, we might read this as an instance where the *Autoren* of the New German Cinema return to the French auteurs' fascination with the manipulation of Hollywood genres. Beyond the obligatory nod to Fassbinder's 'noir' and 'Sirkean' phases, however, these and other constructions of character, narrative and style through generic borrowings remain largely unexplored in the context of the New German Cinema. Thus, not only would the films of May Spils and Werner Enke merit a much closer look in terms of the way they use and revise comedy and slapstick formats for the purposes of social critique (particularly through defeatist performances of masculinity by Enke), one might also reconsider the productive use of melodrama in the so-called *Frauenfilm*: For example, by looking at some of the patently generic (melodramatic) aspects in films like *Die bleierne Zeit/Marianne and Juliane* (Margarethe von Trotta, 1981) or *Der Beginn aller Schrecken ist die Liebe/Love is the Beginning of all Terrors* (Helke Sander, 1986), we might dislodge such films from their ghettoizing association with an essentialized 'women's experience' and begin thinking about their relevance in a broader project to connect 'issue-oriented' filmmaking with the politics of the popular. Rather than simply dismissing the use of generic patterns as forms of depoliticization and trivialization, we should take these films as an opportunity to reopen the case for the inherently political function of genre, particularly in the New German Cinema. Similarly, the borrowing of 'noir' references and the resultant explorations of

gender and modernization in urban settings is not limited to Fassbinder or the early 1970s. A film like Doris Dörrie's *Happy Birthday, Türke!* (1991) for example, makes highly productive use of the hard-boiled genre by articulating the generic gender identity of the tough guy with an investigation of his ethnic identity; as a result, the film is able to construct both the German-Turkish and the male identifications of its (anti)hero in an uneasy and highly provocative mix of stereotyping and performance. Finally, particularly in light of the recent return to genre in the German cinema, detailed attention to past and present uses of generic forms of characterization, narration or style might prove helpful in reassessing the history of German filmmaking since 1962 in terms of its continuities and its discontinuities: juxtaposing the sendup of the Western in a film like Detlev Buck's *Wir Können auch anders/No more Mr Nice Guy* (1993) with Roland Klick's *Deadlock*, we might find the generic affinities useful in tracing broader shifts in the construction of masculinity, a national imaginary, or a national cinema.

Though this is not the place to pursue these investigations, I would hope that my reading of Thome's film might provide some starting points for such a project. In particular, the citational adoption of 'American' generic styles, characters, and narrative patterns in *Rote Sonne* suggests that we conceive the function of genre in terms of what it *enables*, rather than simply pigeonholing it for its trivializing lack of authenticity. Instead of dismissing these films on some preconceived norms of realism, we should study the kinds of 'realities' that the different genres and their critical appropriations *produce*. Rather than insisting that "patterns don't pay" in the cinema of the Federal Republic,⁴⁰ we should look at how those patterns add an important dimension to the 'variety' that supposedly constitutes the New German Cinema's 'strength.'

This proposed revaluation of genre also entails some more detailed attention to the function of Americanization in postwar Germany. Here, my analysis was intended to show that there are at least four different levels on which we can usefully trace what Wenders describes as an American 'stance' towards surfaces and the superficial: the levels of cinematography, editing, acting and character treatment, and the level of the narration itself. Following Wenders's own suggestions, we might in fact code each of these levels with particular 'Americanisms': thus, the cinematography and editing of *Rote Sonne* recall the aesthetics of American comic strips, the characters call up and play upon American star images (Bogart, Bacall), and the narrative is overdetermined by numerous references to so-called 'male' Hollywood genres (noir and gangster films, the Western). In this respect, *Rote Sonne* and the other films of the New Munich Group constitute a specific intervention in the discourse of 'Americanization' that has provided the rather uneasy counterpart to the development of the New German Cinema since its beginnings.

41 Timothy Corrigan, *New German Film: the Displaced Image*, second edition (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 6. See also Gernsmeier, *Framed Visions*.

Clearly, Thome shares with other filmmakers the basic premiss under which Timothy Corrigan describes the New German Cinema as a whole: namely, that Hollywood's dominance – if not 'tyranny' – over the filmic *vraisemblable* entailed a situation in which 'the roots of [a given German filmmaker's] style and filmic structures would always be more or less American and always to some extent in tension with his or her own filmic, cultural, and political history'.⁴¹ This is a tension that *Rote Sonne* confronts in a manner that is characteristic for the films of the New Munich Group, a manner which I have attempted to describe as 'laconic'. Rather than negotiating Hollywood's dominance in terms of cultural imperialism in this regard, or trying simply to negate some aspect of the Hollywood system in an attempt to forge a unique 'auteurial' vision, the young Munich filmmakers' (Franco-) American cinephilia leads them to functionalize the topical issue of Americanization on the level of character treatment. Attempting to fathom the use-value of American popular culture for the late 1960s in Germany, these films are built around characters that Wenders locates in American B-movies and in comic books; those characters are 'pop' in precisely the sense described by Georg Seeßlen in his essay on German film in the late 1960s:

Pop is the nobilitated form of Popular Culture, a presentiment of camp and more closely related to the Beat-Culture that leads to the Flower-Power movement than to the culture of rock, which tends towards the political underground. . . . During these years, Pop also stood for a lifestyle which drew more pleasure from role playing than from self-identification.⁴²

42 Georg Seeßlen, 'Nichts Fremdes in keinem Eigenen,' in Hoffmann and Schobert (eds), *Abschied vom Gestern*, p. 38.

This valorization of role-playing over self-identification, which I attempt to describe in terms of the opposition between Wenders and Thome above, is typical for the characters that populate Thome's early films. Inasmuch as these films are 'pop' – or, more precisely, 'Münchener Pop' – they also pursue a strategy of aesthetic opposition that articulates itself most clearly, perhaps, in the performative gestures of refusal exemplified in both character treatment and acting. In this respect, it is hardly surprising that their films play with generic expectations and a self-styled star system not at the characteristically New German level of the *Autor*, but in terms of their casting politics, which led Lemke to build a film around Ira von Fürstenberg in *Negresco***** *Eine tödliche Affäre* (1967), Schmidt to cast photographers and models in *Jet Generation* (1967), and Thome to bank on Böhm's and Obermeier's subversive 'glamour' in both *Rote Sonne* and *Detektive*. The intransigence with which these characters move through the films' contrived plots – as Wenders says, 'in *Rote Sonne*, the people all talk as though the progression of the film was of no importance to them' – accounts for much of the effectiveness of these films even after thirty years.

At the same time, however, the 'aesthetic opposition' embodied in Thome's and Zihlmann's professed 'love for the simple things, the popular', or in their refusal 'to accept the distinction between art and entertainment that our culture has made and continues to uphold',⁴³ needs to be contextualized: while these films clearly elaborate a noticeably subversive discourse, it is an opposition that becomes most legible in, and perhaps remains limited to, the historical context of the New German Cinema as *Autorenfilm*. My reason for focusing on Thome, then, is not simply to add his name and his films to the ranks of the canonized *Autoren*. In fact, as I have already suggested, the very notion of an *Autorenkino* that is so central to the emergence and international image of the Young/New German Cinema proves somewhat inadequate as a framework in which to inscribe Thome's filmmaking. From the importance of the scriptwriter who is not identical with Thome, the director, to the willingness (even the insistence) on Thome's part to work with the established industry, a number of factors combine to resist the label *Autorenkino*. Patalas already sensed as much in an early review of *Rote Sonne*:

[Zihlmann's and Thome's] films also resist the law in the fact that they are no *Autorenfilme*. Their aim is not the expression of a sovereign bourgeois identity, but the greatest possible anonymity, siding with the objects [Parteinahme für die Objekte]. Not '*Kino der Autoren*,' but *Kino* tout court. . . . Zihlmann's films do not yearn for a return to the precapitalist artisanal forms of production for autonomous artworks. Rather, they push the development of outdated forms towards their own destruction.⁴⁴

'The high-class-cinemas showed the films of Kluge, Herzog, Syberberg, but not mine,' remembers Thome.⁴⁵ In order to gauge the significance of *Rote Sonne* in its historical context, we might usefully contrast its laconic style with the canonized productions of the Young German Cinema, which are rarely as radical in their refusal to motivate the fictional pretences of their plots as is *Rote Sonne*. Thus, in *Abschied von Gestern/Yesterday Girl* (1966), Alexander Kluge motivates the nomadic existence of Anita G. through numerous references to the past and present of the Federal Republic (as well as of the *Ostzone* which Anita has fled); Peter Schamoni pits the young generation against the old in *Schonzeit für Füchse/Closed Season for Foxes* (1966) for both dramatic tension and explanatory power; even a film like Werner Herzog's *Lebenszeichen/Signs of Life* (1968), which at first sight would seem to share some of *Rote Sonne*'s impassive stance towards the unfolding of the plot, ultimately takes care to motivate the explosive designs of its hero Stroszek through lengthy third-person voiceover. This is a tendency which is only amplified with the transition from the Young to the New German Cinema. Particularly insofar as the latter has come to be identified as a cinema preoccupied with the nation's past and present, it is

44 Enno Patalas, 'Scheherezade muß sterben', *Filmkritik*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1970), p. 16.

45 Rolf Aurich, 'Männer nach Benutzung bitte töten: der Regisseur Rudolf Thome und sein neuer alter Kultfilm *Rote Sonne*', *Berliner Zeitung*, 11 October 1994.

consistently assumed that New German Films relate in more or less direct ways to the sociopolitical context of their times. In this context, Thome's/Zihlmann's version of pop was bound to irritate, representing as it did a noticeable departure from then current conventions of post-Oberhausen cinema. While none of the New Munich filmmakers emerged into the mainstream of the New German Cinema, they provided a significant heritage for those who followed, including, most obviously, Fassbinder and Wenders. Fassbinder in particular experiments with a distinctly similar laconic approach to the cinema in his early 'noir' films, whereas Wenders's cinematic practice evolves in a slightly different direction from this common point of departure. As a congenial critic of Thome's filmmaking, however, Wenders did pinpoint the significance of the laconic style at this juncture in German film history:

This is the first German FEATURE film (*SPIELfilm*). . . . Everything here is surface and a sign for itself, never 'subtle' (*hintergründig*), 'deep', or 'meaningful'. For precisely this reason, though, *Rote Sonne* succeeds where half a dozen German films have recently failed. . . . Because of the fact that the film never pretends to be problematic or faithful to reality, and because it never wants to generate 'seriousness', choosing instead to present its own overblown science fiction plot in an insistent and uncomplicated fashion, thus never hiding its play (*SPIELcharakter*), this film manages to make more reality tangible and to show more of the generation that it represents than all other German films that came before.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Wim Wenders, 'Gutachten für die Filmbewertungsstelle', reprinted in *25 Jahre Rudolf Thomas Rote Sonne*, p. 20.

Must you remember this?: orchestrating the 'standard' pop song in *Sleepless in Seattle*

IAN GARWOOD

Different formats: transforming the pop song into film music

Kenneth Branagh's latest film adaptation of a Shakespeare play, *Love's Labour's Lost* (2000), features at least three forms of markedly 'antiquated' discourse: the playwright's original prose which, even accounting for the film's attempts to crop and modernize it, retains a distinct sense of coming from another age; the black and white 'newsreel' footage, complete with plummy narrator, licensed by the play's transportation to a Europe on the brink of World War II; and, as the film's most hyped innovation, the brace of song-and-dance sequences featuring familiar pop standards penned by the likes of Cole Porter, Jerome Kern and Irving Berlin.

Love's Labour's Lost is branded as a 'musical romantic comedy' in its opening credits. This explicit staking out of generic territory prepares the viewer for the type of transformation of Shakespeare's text that is to come. Equally, however, it sets limits on an understanding of this transformation as a type of contemporizing. Firstly, the practice of naming a film's genre in its titles is itself an outmoded filmic convention. Secondly, the genre to which it refers enjoyed its heyday some sixty years ago (precisely the period in which the film is set). *Love's Labour's Lost* attempts not only to convince its audience that songs from the Broadway back catalogue are the expressive equals of Shakespeare's poetry, but also to make a case for the viability of an apparently defunct genre.

However, whilst the bona fide film musical may have fallen out of favour, the songs associated with its golden era have remained a consistent presence in contemporary Hollywood, particularly in the romantic comedy genre. This article will discuss the use of the 'standard' pop song in modern screen romances, with specific reference to *Sleepless in Seattle* (Nora Ephron, 1993), a hugely successful comedy featuring such musical staples as 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' (w. Harold Arlent and E.Y. Harburg), 'Stand By Your Man' (w. Billy Sherrill and Tammy Wynette) and 'As Time Goes By' (w. Herman Hopfield). *Love's Labour's Lost* is unusual in its revival of the musical's traditional structure – the separation between 'narrative' and 'number'.¹ *Sleepless in Seattle* is more conventional in its use of the standard pop song as an alternative, or complement, to the underscore, playing on the soundtrack without a visible onscreen source. One strand of my analysis will explore the shaping of pop music into a kind of film music (as underscore), paying attention to its deployment in two familiar roles: as a key to understanding what a *character* may be feeling at a particular moment; and as a type of 'guide', suggesting what the *viewer* should be feeling in relation to a particular moment.

The other strand of my enquiry concerns the particular cultural assumptions that have influenced the use of the standard song in contemporary comedies. *Love's Labour's Lost*, the film, is as nostalgic as it is innovative. It stops short of updating the play to the modern day, choosing to equate the lyrical skills of Shakespeare with the Gershwin Brothers rather than with Radiohead or the Butthole Surfers (as is the case in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* [1996]). In so doing, it pays testament to an assumption about the standard pop song that goes some way to explaining its recurring association with romantic scenarios: the perception that older songs engage more transparently and expressively with the idea of romance than more modern, and cynical, artistic texts.

The standard song in romantic comedy

The inclusion of old songs in contemporary screen romance has generally been appraised according to the music's ability to indicate the general emotional sincerity of the films in which they appear. Steve Neale counts the standard song amongst the 'heavily conventional' signs of old-fashioned romance that make credible these films' preoccupation with a belief in 'true love':

In all these films poetic speech and the signs of traditional romance do their work: 'true' – and by implication, lasting – love is finally established.²

Frank Krutnik, discussing the presence of Frank Sinatra, Ray Charles

¹ The extent to which narrative and number are actually separated is the matter of some debate. See, for example, John Mueller, 'Fred Astaire and the integrated musical', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1984).

² Steve Neale, 'The big romance or something wild?: romantic comedy today', *Screen*, vol. 33, no. 3 (1992), pp. 284–99, p. 296.

- 3 Frank Krutnik, 'Love lies: romantic fabrication in contemporary romantic comedy', in Peter William Evans and Celestino Deleyto (eds), *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 15–36, p. 25. Krutnik argues that 'true love' for the film's characters in the new romance involves embracing the romantic ideal as a necessary fiction – notions of emotional sincerity are thus bound with a character's acceptance of their own self-deception. *Sleepless in Seattle* appears to me, however, to be an attempt to reassert the ideal of the 'truly' sincere.

- 4 Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), p. 55.

and Bing Crosby on the soundtrack of *When Harry Met Sally* (Rob Reiner, 1989), claims that the songs summon 'a nostalgic vision of romantic certainty to guide the stumbling but inescapable progress of Harry and Sally towards coupledness'.³

In both Neale's and Krutnik's characterisations, the songs are seen to possess a sense of confidence in their own romantic sentiments. As such, the music acts as a type of counsel for the characters whose romantic adventures it soundtracks: the happy resolution of these intrigues relies on the leads gaining the sense of self-belief that has been discernible all along in the songs that have accompanied their faltering progress.

This observation puts some distance between the song and the action it accompanies, thereby suggesting a different relationship between music and narrative to that ascribed to the traditional score. Claudia Gorbman comes to this summary of film music's conventional roles:

[Film music] bonds: shot to shot, narrative event to meaning, spectator to narrative, spectator to audience. . . . Overall, the two overarching roles of background music may be characterized as semiotic (as anchorage) and psychological (as suture or bonding).⁴

The standard pop song in modern romantic comedy, as provisionally described, would seem to neglect the first two stages of bonding identified by Gorbman. It may connect spectator to narrative, as a vocal assertion of a belief in old-fashioned romance: a belief that needs to be cultivated in the audience for the eventual commitment of its characters to such an ideal to appear plausible. It may also bond spectator to audience: the success of the song's encouragement of a sense of belief in romance can only be achieved by a shared awareness amongst viewers of how the standard song is capable of denoting non-cynical (that is, non-modern) modes of romance. In this process, however, the song neglects to bond shot with shot, or narrative event with meaning. Under this conception, a song's 'fit' with the specific narrative moment it accompanies becomes unimportant.

The relationship between song and narrative: 'global' and 'local' effects

The title sequence of *Sleepless in Seattle* does appear to use its song as a guide to the spirit in which the film should be viewed, rather than locating its affect within a specific moment. Jimmy Durante sings 'As Time Goes By' over a stylized map of America gradually casting itself out of shadow, whilst an increasing number of stars (with the cast's names lighting up with them) illuminate the sky. The lyrics of the well-known song clearly act as a mission statement on behalf of the film: even in a modern, cynical world 'it's still the

same old story', 'a kiss is still a kiss' and in love the 'fundamental things apply'. Whilst the revealing of the map prefigures the eventual bridging of the geographical distances between Sam (Tom Hanks) in Seattle and Annie (Meg Ryan) in Baltimore, the song itself announces the certainty of belief in romance that makes this bridging inevitable.

The decision to use Jimmy Durante's version rather than that of a more technically accomplished, or conventionally soulful, singer also colours the particular type of romantic mood the film wishes to sustain throughout. Durante's singing is both heart-felt and comic, his clipped and gruff vocals grating against the dexterous musical backing. In the final line of the release, for example, as the strings escalate upwards towards a crescendo before reentering the verse, Durante's singing of 'That no one can deny' fails to match the rise of the music. His sustaining of 'no one' peters out with a wobble, and a pause for breath is necessary before continuing with a muted 'can deny'. After a sombre pre-credit sequence, in which Sam buries his wife, Durante's singing prepares the viewer for the balance of romance and comedy that is to follow.

If other romantic comedies often also feature title sequences which seem to offer general guidance and advice to the viewer through song, it is not inevitable that this advice should be presented with such sincerity. *My Best Friend's Wedding* (P.J. Hogan, 1997), for example, features a soundtrack of songs that have, like the standards used in *Sleepless in Seattle*, achieved a type of canonical status: various numbers by doyen of easy-listening pop, Burt Bacharach. The film launches straight into its credits, which feature singer Ani di Franco performing 'Wishin and Hopin'' (w. Burt Bacharach and Hal David II), a guide to wannabe brides on how to tempt their dream man down the aisle. Accompanied by a trio of backing singers, di Franco runs through a full-blown song-and-dance number, demonstrating the girl-next-door demeanour which the lyrics of the song advocate as the best strategy through which to secure a wedding ring.

However, the effect of the sequence is to prime the viewer for a more complicated romantic scenario to unfold when the narrative proper gets underway. Di Franco's gestures are so heavily contrived and exaggeratedly coy, her costume and the backdrop against which she dances so cartoonishly vivid, her performance so bereft of a framing context, that the viewer is not encouraged to take the advice contained in the song seriously. The song's voicing of romantic certainties does not necessarily attract the audience's belief in those certainties.

The version of 'As Time Goes By' heard at the beginning of *Sleepless in Seattle* is presented with more sincerity than 'Wishin and Hopin'' in *My Best Friend's Wedding*. However, there are still further qualifications to make when agreeing that 'As Time Goes By'

strives for global rather than specific narrative affect. Firstly, any credit sequence, whether accompanied by scored music or a song, displays a less localized mode of narration than that found in the main body of the film. As well as announcing the names of the cast, the sequence will often present visual material that prefigures subsequent narrative developments, or feature a musical theme which 'sets the tone' for the action to come.

More importantly, the credit sequence in *Sleepless in Seattle* is also a response to the action which immediately precedes it. The opening scenes find Sam fleeing Chicago because it holds too many memories for him. In the first shot, as Sam stands over the grave of his wife, the camera moves to the side and up to reveal the cityscape looming behind him. This association of an American city with death and emotional claustrophobia finds a positive response in the credit sequence with the generation of light over a panoramic view of the whole country. Furthermore, Sam's last words before the credits are answered immediately by Durante's singing. Upon the suggestion that he will find someone new to love in Seattle, Sam snaps 'it just doesn't happen twice', at which point the screen darkens and Durante is heard singing 'you must remember this'. 'As Time Goes By' becomes not just a universal plea for the endurance of notions of romance, but also a reminder to Sam that time can heal his pain. The advice Sam refuses to accept from his friends is reasserted by the singer, Durante's weathered tones denoting him as a 'voice of experience' whose claims, in contrast to the opening scene, are supported by the *mise-en-scene* of the sequence.

'As Time Goes By' constructs a number of relationships in the title sequence, both in terms of the narrative as a whole and in its more local context: it operates according to a principle of *attunement*, the sentiments of the song being mirrored in the romantic imagery onscreen; it *preempts* narrative developments, the certainty of the song's belief prefiguring Sam's and Annie's own discovery of that belief; finally it *comments* upon the narrative, not just in the sense of advising the viewer of the spirit in which they should 'read' the film (its global function), but also by responding to its immediate narrative surroundings (its specific function in countering Sam's despondency).

The effect of a pop song's 'autonomy'

The observation that the song comments upon a specific moment in the film is important, because it highlights a difference between what the composed score and the pop song is routinely asked to do. The composed score relies on the particular moment it accompanies in a film for its existence, but this is not so obviously the case with the pop song. The presence of a human voice and the awareness,

particularly acute when the track is well known, that the music's origins may lay outside a narrative moment can encourage the view that the song possesses more autonomy from the image. A brief sequence contrasting Sam and his son Jonah's bedtime preparations with Annie and her current fiancé Walter's, soundtracked by Dr John performing 'Makin' Whoopee' (w. Walter Donaldson and Gus Kahn), illustrates how this looser bond between diegetic action and nondiegetic music can cast the singer in the role of detached commentator.

The scene consists of just three shots, which are accompanied by an abridged version of the song, Dr John's rolling piano intro segueing immediately into a brief verse. The music begins in the bathroom, a frontal two-shot of Sam asking for the towel and then rubbing his son's face with it roughly, but in fun, before marching him off screen. The singing only commences after a cut to the bedroom of Annie and Walter, who are framed in a similar two-shot, with their backs turned to each other. Annie passes a bottle of water, some tissues and a small medicine bottle to the hyperallergic Walter, who uses them to fill up and wipe clean his bedside vaporizer. Over this activity, Dr John sings:

Another bride, another groom
 Another funny honeymoon
 Another season, another reason
 for making . . .

whereupon there follows a cut to later that night, Annie lying in bed unable to sleep, whilst Walter snores contentedly. The final word of the verse, 'whoopee', plays over the shot, the song ending abruptly as it is superseded by Carly Simon's version of 'In the Wee Small Hours' (w. David Mann and Bob Hilliard).

Visually, this sequence compares the different levels of physicality displayed in the two relationships on show. Sam's and Jonah's rough-and-tumble sharing of the towel, germs and all, contrasts strongly with Annie's passing of the tissues for Walter as he prepares to ward off any impurities in the air. It has been a staple element of the romantic comedy to bestow upon its 'wrong partners' a particular eccentricity which is symptomatic of their unsuitability.⁵ In a film that sets such store in the power of touch (the 'magic' that passes through Annie and Sam when they finally hold hands), Walter's lack of robustness is a fatal flaw. This sequence reaffirms his physical fragility by measuring it against Sam's and Jonah's assured tactility.

This comparison can be noted without paying attention to the soundtrack. Yet, by using 'Makin' Whoopee' instead of scored music, the sequence also begins to suggest the desirability of Annie sharing in the healthily physical relationship displayed by Sam and Jonah. The song is preceded by Jonah asking his dad whether he will

5 Neale, 'The big romance or something wild?', pp. 289–90.

have sex when he starts darting again, and if so whether the woman will scratch up his back (he has seen this happen on cable television). Introduced after Jonah's precocious questioning, but before Sam attacks him with the towel, the song's entrance is neatly caught between the two activities upon which the term 'makin' whoopee' puns. Whilst the phrase on its own may refer generally to boisterous fun, of the type enjoyed by Sam and Jonah, within the song it clearly stands for sex. So that the contact between father and son is not granted unwholesome connotations, the lyrics which set the phrase within this context are not heard until the scene transfers to Annie and Walter. Here though, the song moves from attunement with the image (even if the viewer does not recognize the melody, the barrelling piano is appropriate to the scene's unruliness), to ironic distance. Dr John's throaty rasp emphasizes the raucous undertow of the lyrics (whereas the clean swing of Frank Sinatra's version, for example, pays attention to its bouncing rhymes), making the bedroom scene accompanying it a particularly disappointing anti-climax. Isolating the final word 'whoopee' (an exclamation of joy) over the close up of Annie's glum face makes resoundingly clear the discrepancy between the expectations of the soundtrack (and Annie), and the visual images with which it is associated.

'Makin' Whoopee' is able to achieve a distance from diegetic space that permits irony, because its origins are autonomous from any specific narrative moment. The audience's familiarity with the song is certainly a factor in why this process can be enacted so fluently, but the innovation of its delivery within the film is equally important. Neither of the songs discussed so far is represented by its most popularized version in the film. Of all the musical numbers in *Sleepless in Seattle*, 'Makin' Whoopee', edited down to a short, self-contained excerpt, is the one that has been most clearly doctored to attain a specific narrative effect. That this organization of song and diegetic space results in a deliberate estrangement between the two indicates that the standard song does not simply provide an emotional landscape against which the onscreen romance can appear credible. Instead, 'Makin' Whoopee' works to the opposite affect, disassociating itself from the only romance the film has to offer at this time.

The different values of different types of pop

Two other songs are used ironically in *Sleepless in Seattle*, and these instances call into question another assumption about the use of older pop songs in romantic comedy: that the virtues of the 'old-fashioned' visions of romance held by the songs have to be accepted as credible and relevant. The possibility of a song being mocked through its filmic representation has already been discussed in relation to the use

of 'Wishin' and Hopin'' in *My Best Friend's Wedding*. In *Sleepless in Seattle*, the sentiments of its two country and western songs, 'Back in the Saddle Again' (w. Gene Autry) and 'Stand By Your Man', are held up for ridicule by the way they are positioned within the narrative.

Interestingly, they are also the two most evidently classic versions to be used on the soundtrack. The musical numbers in *Sleepless in Seattle* are generally marked by an effort to renew them, to allay their canonical status with a freshness of arrangement that gives them a distinctive narrative resonance: so far, I have suggested Jimmy Durante's singing is chosen for the comedy produced by its artistic 'underachievement'; and Dr John's for the physicality of his voice. 'Stand By Your Man', in contrast, is Tammy Wynette's definitive rendition, whilst the antiquated nature of Autry's 'Back in the Saddle Again' is marked by an accompanying crackle of static (like a dusty old record), and the primitive mono recording which reduces his voice to a flat nasal twang.

The two sequences in which the songs appear pair together as examples of the falseness of the romantic visions that maintain distance between Sam and Annie. Both reveal the characters' self-deception by highlighting their strained efforts to display confidence. In the first, 'Back in the Saddle Again' soundtracks Sam's awkward attempts to set up his first date since the death of his wife. In the second, 'Stand By Your Man' accompanies a montage sequence in which Annie receives a Valentine's Day card from Walter, informs her best friend that she has finally put all thoughts of Sam from her mind, and eventually arrives at Walter's hotel room in New York.

The irony within these sequences is of a different order to that contained in the 'Makin' Whoopee' scene. The latter song speaks from a position of authority within the sequence: it imposes a vital, physical urging upon diegetic action bereft of this quality, suggesting in the process that a clearly unfulfilled Annie would benefit from joining Sam and Jonah, whose playing around has been presented as in keeping with the song's tone. The ironic affect is created, therefore, by a divergence between song and image. 'Stand By Your Man' and 'Back in the Saddle Again', in contrast, are integrated into sequences whose textual strategies as a whole betray a distance from those used in the rest of the narrative.

As Sam phones up his potential date, as much as anything to prove to his son that he still understands the rules of engagement, the camera cuts restlessly around his fidgeting figure, switching between angles directly on the 180° line, and moving rapidly between midshots and closeups. This uncomfortable framing amplifies the nervousness Sam demonstrates in his phone manner, underlining the impression that, at this moment, he does not quite know where he stands. Whilst the lyrics of 'Back in the Saddle Again' may seem more sure of themselves, detailing the manly

activities of a Wild West cowboy ('toting my old 44'), the presentation of the song robs it of its potential to ridicule Sam's lack of wherewithal (as was the case with 'Makin' Whoopee' in relation to Walter). The thinness of the song's primitive recording makes the voicing of its own certainties as unconvincing as Sam's attempts to take the initiative in setting up his date. This aural deficiency is felt by the viewer not only because of their expectations of high-quality sound reproduction in modern cinema, but also on account of the otherwise pristine versions of songs that occur throughout *Sleepless in Seattle*. Consequently, the song's vision of masculine behaviour, to which Sam is unable to do justice, is coded in any case as being antiquatedly irrelevant. Sam's approach to courtship and the sentiments of the song are shown to be as outdated as each other.

The framing of Annie's involvement in the 'Stand By Your Man' sequence is as discernibly inelegant as the nervous cutting around Sam on the phone. As Tammy Wynette's song strikes up, there is a zoom from a tacky plastic loveheart in the window of a wedding store; as it fades out under Annie and Walter's conversation, there is a further zoom away from another kitschy symbol of romance: a globe encircled with a chain of lovehearts hanging from the ceiling of another shop. Inbetween, Annie has made an all too self-conscious show of her determination to follow the advice of the song and stick with her fiancé, declaiming his name to the air as she hugs a card from him, telling her friend how much he means to her, and, as the song reaches its refrain, throwing her arms around him. Her attempts at intimate embrace, however, are considerably hindered by the number of bags hanging from her body, as well as her partner's natural clumsiness.

The two country and western songs in *Sleepless in Seattle* make a mockery of their own sentiments at the same time as they soundtrack scenes in which the two main characters make a mockery of themselves. Tammy Wynette's impassioned plea for women to remain faithful through thick and thin becomes the musical voice of the kitsch mise-en-scene, overemphatic proclamations and uncomfortable body language that indicate Annie's self-deception. Gene Autry's anachronistic vision of self-assured masculinity offers an appropriately unsuitable backing for Sam's misguided attempts to set up a date with the wrong woman. The lack of belief the film holds in the relationships on display at these points is conveyed by the way both music and image are presented as drained of emotional authenticity.

Narrowing the 'gap' between song and narrative events

It may be the case that it is more common to create irony, of whatever type, by using an 'imported' pop song, rather than through

the specially composed score. However, there are at least two provisos to this observation. Firstly, as the use of the country and western songs in *Sleepless in Seattle* demonstrates, music and image may both be equally complicit in constructing an ironic effect. It is not necessarily the case that a sequence must maintain a quality of 'distance' between the song and visual action in order to create irony, even if this is the strategy adopted in the 'Makin' Whoopee' scene. Secondly, pop songs are routinely used in a manner which minimizes any sense of detachment between soundtrack and image. In other words, the song is often, like the composed score, asked to express through music the 'true' feelings of the characters in its soundtracks.

The clearest examples in *Sleepless in Seattle* of this type of use can be found in two more songs which, like the country and western numbers, can be regarded as a pair. Nat King Cole's 'Stardust' (w. Hoagy Carmichael) and Carly Simon's 'In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning' accompany matching scenes of lonely reverie, in which the characters think of, and suffer ghostly interventions from, the two people that are weighing on their mind. On New Year's Eve, Sam walks around his house restlessly, finding no joy in the fireworks that shoot into the sky above him. Settling onto his sofa, the ghost of his wife enters the frame and talks to him. Similarly, after the 'Makin' Whoopee' sequence, Annie is unable to sleep, 'In the Wee Small Hours' beginning, like 'Stardust', as she walks down the stairs. She is confronted by the source of her unease in the kitchen, where the radio replays Sam's phone-in conversation, his disembodied voice bringing Annie to tears once more. In both cases the song provides a suitable setting for the characters' sleepless pondering: 'Stardust' describes someone losing themselves in memories, like Sam; 'In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning' articulates that feeling of nagging worry which is keeping Annie awake. Unlike the other musical sequences I have analyzed, in these two instances the songs are attuned to the 'real' emotions of the characters, that is to say the feelings they reveal when they are alone.

Romantic comedies as 'incomplete' musicals

The closing of the 'gap' between the song and other narrative events can be viewed in this manner, as a strategy which transforms the musical number into a more conventional type of scored music. However, the insistent integration of older songs into the narrative of *Sleepless in Seattle* allows for another possibility, made explicit in *Love's Labour's Lost*: the potential for this type of modern romantic comedy to be viewed as a kind of musical. I will move on to discuss the limits of this potential, as mapped out in *Sleepless in Seattle*, but will first cite an example from another contemporary romance,

namely Gene Kelly's 'You Were Meant For Me' (w. Herb Nacio Brown and Arthur Freed), as it appears in *The Object of My Affection* (Nicholas Hytner, 1998). This acts as an extreme case of the willingness of the romantic comedy to hark back to the forms of the Hollywood musical (without, like *Love's Labour's Lost*, actually becoming one). It also raises questions about the song's attachment to the sensibility of a particular character (which appears straightforward in connection with 'Stardust' and 'In the Wee Small Hours'). Both of these considerations will be addressed in my closing observations on *Sleepless in Seattle*.

The Object of My Affection charts the course of a relationship between two flatmates: Nina (Jennifer Aniston) and George (Paul Rudd). When Nina becomes pregnant, she asks George to raise her child with her, in the place of its natural father. However, Nina soon finds herself viewing George as a potential lover as well as surrogate father, despite the fact that he is gay. The scene featuring 'You Were Meant For Me' occurs before Nina realizes she is pregnant. She has just crept out of her bed, which she is sharing with her boyfriend, to check on George, who has come back from a disastrous blind date. The song begins as she makes her way back to her room, her movement covered by its opening lines ('life was a song, you came along, I've laid awake the whole night through, if I ever dared to think you cared, this is what I'd say to you'). As Kelly begins to sing the refrain, there is a cut in space and time to the dance class George and Nina have begun to attend. A montage sequence follows, chronicling their gradual improvement. At this point their dancing is conspicuously not attuned to the gentle rhythms of Kelly's song (they are practising the twist and the tango), and the music is, in any case, often rendered barely audible by the dance teacher's instructions.

The song's arrival at its relatively lengthy instrumental phase is the moment at which image and music fall in time with each other. Furthermore, in the instrumental section's closing states, the film focuses exclusively upon George and Nina, rather than framing them with other members of the class. As they dance together, they waltz into a separate part of the studio, which is empty of clutter and softly lit, unlike the crowded and bright space in which they started. This shifting to a less 'realistic', more 'magical' type of space is put into a particular context as the song is then returned to its original owner: a cut to a television screen, with the song continuing seamlessly, shows Gene Kelly serenading Debbie Reynolds in *Singin' in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1953). For viewers not already familiar with the original sequence, it now becomes clear that, as George and Nina sallied together into a more intimate space, they were dressed identically to the lovers in *Singin' in the Rain*.

This sequence implements two possibilities made available (but by no means routinely made use of) by the awareness that a pop song

already exists, in a particular shape, before it comes to the film. Despite its shifting prominence on the soundtrack, 'You Were Meant For Me' does continue, uninterrupted, from beginning to end. The sequence exploits the viewer's recognition that the song has a particular 'fixed' structure: it carries on, under its own steam as it were, whilst the members of the dance class acquire the skill to perform adequately to it. The song provides a ready-made structure which allows the events I have described to congregate as a self-contained sequence.

The scene also provides the spectacle of image and song undergoing a series of shifting attachments, as was evident in the use of 'Makin' Whoopee' in *Sleepless in Seattle*: it appears at first in tandem with Nina's checking up on George and her return to her room; the song then acquires an onscreen source, without, however, securing a simultaneous conviction in the viewer that it is actually being listened to by the film's characters; eventually, the dance class as a whole fall in to its rhythms, before the music's relationship with George and Nina gains in intensity, with the 'magical' transformation of space that occurs when the camera settles on them alone; finally there is a stepping back from this intensity as George and Nina become witnesses to, rather than the subjects of, the musical performance.

If it appears self-evident that, in *Sleepless in Seattle*, 'Stardust' and 'In the Wee Small Hours' are intended to represent, in turn, feelings held by Sam and Annie, the attribution of 'You Were Meant For Me' to one character's sensitivities is less clear-cut. However, there is a suggestion that the intensified intimacy between the two flatmates, apparent as they dance into a more private space, is more Nina's fantasy than George's. The song starts over images of her, all of which suggest she is already preoccupied with George. She has left the side of her boyfriend to check up, somewhat unnecessarily, on her flatmate. Her thoughtful expression as she returns to her room combines with the sentiments voiced in the song (I've been awake the whole night through . . .) to suggest that she may already be thinking of George in romantic terms. By the end of the sequence, George has in fact replaced her boyfriend in her bed, and, in this situation, a passionate embrace does take place. However, George and Nina are actually just lounging about watching TV, whilst the embrace is performed between Kelly and Reynolds in the film they are viewing.

Thus described, the sequence both articulates Nina's desire for a more intimate relationship with George, and encapsulates the impossibility of that desire being fulfilled – the lesson she has to learn over the course of the narrative. By cutting away from George and Nina to Gene and Debbie at exactly the moment the latter embrace passionately, the film frames what has gone on before precisely as a type of dream (the viewer now notes the uncanny matching of costumes). It also wards off the possibility of the dream

coming true: the intensity of the moment has been transferred away from Nina and George, whose body language, in 'real life', betrays buddiness rather than physical intimacy.

This sequence provides a particularly self-referential example of the romantic comedy's courting of the affective power of the 'classic' musical number. However, it also demonstrates the possibility of remaining partly uncommitted to the romantic ideal that seems to be being conveyed in the 'magical' transformation of space 'called forth' by the song. This possibility stems from the song not being sourced with a particular character (which is, of course, always the case in the musical when a performer bursts into song). This allows for a consequent selectivity in the extent to which attachments are made between the music and an onscreen character.

A less self-conscious instance of the romantic comedy's incomplete attachment to the ideals of the musical presents itself in *Sleepless in Seattle*. Of all the song sequences in the film, Joe Cocker's version of 'Bye, Bye Blackbird' (w. Ray Henderson and Mort Dixon) is the one most choreographed as a dance. Announced within the film as the simple lullaby with which Jonah's mother used to send her son to sleep, the version used here is rapturous and expansive rather than homespun and intimate. The image engineers its pace to the rhythm of the song, and also responds to its sense of expansion, so that the sequence opens out the introspection the memory of the song has engendered in Sam to include the thoughts of Annie, the woman who holds the key to his escape from an entrapment in his past.

The song's quality of expansion stems from the gradual introduction of different instrumentation to bolster its rhythmic base. Beginning from a loose arrangement of drums and piano, a clipped guitar figure tightens the rhythm after its first refrain. After the second chorus, the song goes into its release, the piano lending it urgency by reforming its previous melodic, bluesy feel into insistently stabbing chords. The return to the verse from the release is accompanied by short piano phrases that undulate unpredictably, rather than stab insistently.

These rhythmic variations find expression in the image. On the introduction of the guitar, the sequence makes its first expansive cut, away from the close shots between Sam and Jonah in Seattle, as father tells son about his mother, to a long shot of Annie being dropped off in the street in Baltimore. The movement into the release is accompanied by another cut from Sam to Annie, the camera panning in step with Annie as she walks up from a deserted street onto the pavement. This step actually entails a small, but deliberate, kick of her right leg, which falls in time with the first stabbing piano chord. The sweep of the camera movement, compared with the static positions which characterize all the preceding shots in the sequence, adds to the sense of momentum being gathered. Finally, after the

release Annie flexes her legs up and down whilst seated on a bench, her movement choreographed in time with the first melodic piano phrase of the new verse.

The graphic matches with the rhythmic base of the song are consolidated by a corresponding attempt to expand the image in accordance with the song's increasingly epic scale. As strings rise on the soundtrack, the gospel backing vocals become more prevalent, and Cocker's vocals become increasingly tortured, the action opens out from the initial close ups of Sam and Jonah: to the long shot of Annie; an even more distanced view of Sam coming out to his porch; the introduction of movement with Annie's step up onto the pavement; the longest shot yet of Sam as he sits down on his bench overlooking the river; and then a closer shot of Annie also sitting down on a bench overlooking water, as the sequence reverts back to a series of closeups, this time between Sam and Annie.

Expansion, as Richard Dyer has suggested, is fundamental to the creation of a utopian space in the song and dance sequences of musicals.⁶ The numbers work as moments of escape into a mode of emotional expression that can not be enacted in the non-singing sections of the narrative. Yet, the expansion in the 'Bye, Bye Blackbird' sequence does not unlock its featured characters from their vague feelings of loneliness and isolation. Their expressions and body language as they look over the water consistently denote undefined unease, rather than being transformed into fuller expression through the utopian release of the song.

The sequence does, nevertheless, like the dance to 'You Were Meant For Me' in *The Object of My Affection*, create a type of magical space. It provides a point of connection between two characters who assume they are alone. An emphasis is placed on the similarities between their feelings of isolation, the geographical distances between them being reduced to nothing during the process of reaching out and drawing together enacted by the song. In contrast to the number in the musical, however, this utopian moment (finding togetherness in the most unpromising of scenarios) is only felt by the viewer. The diegetic characters remain unaware and unmoved by it. The song enters as if to provide a suitable soundtrack for the emotions of Sam and Jonah, voicing their shared desire to hold on to the memory of their wife and mother. However the yearning, aspirational qualities of Joe Cocker's performance exceeds this narrative function, the sequence continuing to be organized around its affective charge rather than the visible emotions of Sam or Annie.

The 'excessive' emotional range of the pop song

The ability of a nondiegetic song to exceed the emotional range displayed by diegetic characters finds its most extreme enactment in

6 Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars* (London: Routledge, 1999), 146. Dyer also notes that the expansion of the musical number is a key feature of the genre, and that the expansion of the musical number is a key feature of the genre.

7 Claudia Gorbman, in a keynote lecture given to a conference on music in film held at Southampton University in May 1996.

the first musical number after the title sequence. As Sam's emotional intervention on the radio phone-in show draws to its close, Annie, who has been listening in the car, pulls up to Walter's house, the lights from their Christmas tree visible on the left of the frame. Obviously moved by what she has heard (she has been crying, and her face is now sombre), the gloominess of her mood and the literal darkness of the side of the frame she occupies clash sharply with the festive glow of the lights. Similarly, a cut to Sam putting the phone down thoughtfully shows the reflection of Christmas lights in a glass panel to his side. The two shots are accompanied by a nondiegetic version of 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow', sung by Ray Charles. Unidentifiable at first, as it emerges just before its chorus amongst the melee of sound created by Annie's car and the voice of the radio presenter, Charles breaks into the famous refrain just as Sam puts down the phone.

Claudia Gorbman has suggested that Ray Charles 'speaks for' Sam in this sequence.⁷ Yet, the song, both lyrically and in the way it is performed, does not correspond to the emotions the *mise-en-scène* suggests Sam is feeling at this time. Nor does Gorbman's observation take into account the initial emergence of the music over an image of Annie. Like 'Bye, Bye Blackbird', Ray Charles' version of 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' is sung in the style of aspirational soul. The lyric's celebrated yearning for transportation to a magical place, as yet out of sight, is rendered faithfully by the longing contained in Charles's singing. There is no such aspiration registered in the deportment of Annie and Sam. The two shots of them reveal only sobriety: Annie may be lost in thought as she wonders why Sam's story has affected her so strongly; Sam is equally perplexed as he mulls over the strangeness of having been forced to reveal his feelings about his wife on air. Neither, though, could be judged to be looking forward to a scenario in which these nagging thoughts could be banished.

The sequence, however, continues to seek suitable visual imagery to express the sentiments contained in the song. After Charles has sung 'I know somewhere over the rainbow', there is a cut to a boat crossing the frame in front of Sam's house. Over this image we hear the number's final lyric: 'the bluebirds fly, birds fly over the rainbow, why man oh why can't I?' The boat, beautifully lit up and passing serenely from left to right, is clearly intended as a representation of the 'pot of gold' beyond the rainbow for which the singer yearns. A harmonious relationship with lights is integral to Sam and Annie's eventual coupling, but at this stage in the narrative they are estranged from light: blurred in the background in the shot of Annie and distorted by its reflection next to Sam. Furthermore, there is no suggestion at this stage that they are asserting an active desire for that light to be brought into focus for them.

The song as voiceover

- 8 Frank Krutnik, 'Love lies: romantic fabrication in contemporary romantic comedy', in Peter William Evans and Celestino Deleyto (eds), *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998) pp. 15–36, p. 25. It should be noted that Krutnik also discusses different roles played by the standard song in romantic comedies.

Standard songs in modern romantic comedies often do serve to set romantic standards (presenting a 'nostalgic vision of romantic certainty'⁸ for the viewer). This is not all they do, however, as their variety of uses in *Sleepless in Seattle* demonstrates. Yet, no matter how detailed the choreography of a song to a particular narrative moment may be, its specificity as a certain type of musical form, different from both the composed score and the song-and-dance number, is a crucial factor. The fact that these songs are not composed for a specific narrative moment (unlike the score), and do not emanate from the bodies of diegetic characters (unlike the number in the musical), can result in instances like the 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' sequence, where the song's own urgency of aspiration is registered in the mise-en-scene.

In this case, that urgency is provided by Ray Charles's vocals. *Sleepless in Seattle* offers examples of the particular role songs with words can play in narrative films. The ironic representation of Annie's and Walter's relationship as they prepare for bed, for instance, is enacted through the mismatch between onscreen action and Dr John's earthy delivery of 'Makin' Whoopee's lyrics: the same effect could not have been achieved without the presence of a 'commentating' voice on the soundtrack.

This suggests that words sung 'offscreen' can act as a special instance of a common narrational device: the voiceover. Film sound theorist Michel Chion identifies the power of the voiceover (which he refers to as 'textual speech') in the following manner:

Textual speech has the power to make visible the images it evokes through sound – that is, to change the setting, to call up a thing, moment, place, or characters at will.⁹

- 9 Michael Chion (translated by Claudia Gorbman), *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 172.

The image of the ferry-lit boat during 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' is conjured up by Charles's 'voiceover'. However, there is no 'pressure' on the film automatically to match the singer's words with an appropriate image. When a film character intones a voiceover, any significant divergences between offscreen commentary and onscreen action raise the possibility of the narrator's unreliability. The non-diegetic song is saved from this burden of responsibility, partly because the words sung are only one amongst a number of musical elements that could find articulation in the image, but also due to the quality of distance inherent in its use: a quality which necessitates an effort of attachment to be made between a song and particular narrative elements. A narrative film that consistently immersed itself in the details of the songs playing on the soundtrack, to the expense of its 'story', would be as remarkable (and unlikely) as a film with a voiceover narration that bore no relation at all to the events being depicted onscreen.

In the single shot of the boat, however, the 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' sequence does offer a glimpse of what such a film might look like. *Sleepless in Seattle*'s claims to classicism lie in part in its narrow focus on the romantic lives of its lovers: this film displays a 'refreshingly old-fashioned' interest in the feelings of two human beings. Yet, by displaying faith in the equally emotionally 'interested' voice of Ray Charles singing 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow', this exemplary 'human' comedy yields an interesting paradox: the presence of its human beings on screen is made momentarily impossible.

Makeover takeover on British television

RACHEL MOSELEY



Figs 1–3, the moment of revelation on *Changing Rooms* (Bezal, for BBC).

At the National Television Awards in October 1998, the BBC's home makeover show *Changing Rooms* (1996–), defeated docusoap *Animal Hospital* (BBC, 1995–) and cookery makeover show *Celebrity Ready Steady Cook* (BBC, 1997–) in the category of best 'factual entertainment' programme. Television celebrity Noel Edmonds, presenting the award, introduced these as the 'programmes which most accurately reflect the times in which we live and our most popular obsessions', and described *Changing Rooms* as part of a new 'power genre', the makeover show. The clip chosen to represent *Changing Rooms* showed a moment which is the definitive trope of contemporary British television: the point at which the newly made over room (or in other instances, garden or self) is revealed for the first time to its owners, and their reaction is presented to the nation in closeup (figures 1–3). In this particular instance the woman detested her new room. 'You're a nation of voyeurs', announced *Changing Rooms* presenter Carol Smillie as she accepted the award. 'You really like a good old nose round people's homes.' Is 'voyeurism' really what is at the heart of the recent takeover of British television by makeover programming? How exactly does the makeover show and its defining moment of revelation 'accurately reflect our times and obsessions'?

One year earlier, Thomas Sutcliffe in *The Independent* had the following to say:

I'm not sure what it's like with a clear head but BBC1's daytime programming is curiously soothing if you have a bad hangover. It

1 Thomas Sutcliffe, 'Eye on Friday', *The Independent*, 19 September 1997, p. 3.

helps, naturally, that you are not at your most intellectually demanding – at other times, you might want something to chew over but in a crapulous condition, the conceptual babyfood of the makeover and the do-it-yourself tip are likely to be the only things you can keep down. But something larger is conveyed by the almost seamless diet of improvement that the morning schedules offer – an implicit promise that everything is getting better. Though many of these transformations are couched in terms of a 'challenge' (a very busy word in daytime television), the truth is that the programmes contain nothing challenging whatsoever.¹

In one respect, this characterization of the contemporary blossoming of this mode of programming on British daytime television might be apposite – particularly in its referencing of the 'things can only get better' ethos of the New Labour government. Makeover television certainly suggests some possibility of change for the better – of home, of garden, of lifestyle generally, and even of self. Sutcliffe sees this most recent of television tropes as entirely undemanding and, by extension, uninteresting, with his dismissive tone reminiscent of early criticism of women's genres in literature, cinema and television. Programmes in this new television genre focus on personal style (the daytime *Style Challenge* [BBC, 1996–], and the primetime *Looking Good* [BBC, 1997–] and *She's Gotta Have It* [C4, 1998–]) and the domestic environment, whether home (the daytime *Real Rooms* [BBC, 1997–], and primetime *Changing Rooms*) or garden (the primetime *Ground Force* [BBC, 1997–]) and their spin-off series and copies. Presenters from both *Changing Rooms* and *Ground Force* have fronted spin-off shows on the back of the popular originals: Lawrence Llewelyn-Bowen with *Fantasy Rooms* (1999–), a makeover show which indulged the presenter's flamboyant 'designer' image, and Charlie Dimmock with *Charlie's Garden Army* (1999–), a show which makes over community gardens. A couple of years after *Changing Rooms* appeared so did Carol Vorderman's *Better Homes* (ITV, 1999–). As with *Changing Rooms*, *Better Homes* centres on neighbours and their houses, but the emphasis is on competition, not community spirit, the goal being to improve the value of each house with professional makeovers, and to do a good, permanent job. The neighbour who most improves the value of their home wins a cash prize.

The majority of the shows mentioned are BBC products and could be gathered broadly under the umbrella 'factual entertainment'. While these shows now also run every day on cable and digital channel UK Style, they have retained their prominence on terrestrial television. A number of the key programmes in the genre, such as *Changing Rooms* and *Ready Steady Cook*, are made by the independent production company Bazal, which describes its shows as

'infotainment' and is aiming for ratings rather than Reithian principles.² Nevertheless, in relation to its ethos 'to inform, educate and entertain', public service broadcasting now extends to the care of the self, the home and the garden, addressing its audience through a combination of consumer competence and do-it-yourself-on-a-shoestring. The burgeoning of this new mode of programming must be understood in the context of the changing climate of broadcasting in Britain and the extended choice offered by satellite and cable channels. In conjunction with legislation in the 1990 Broadcasting Act which obliged the BBC to commission twenty-five per cent of its programming from independent production companies such as Bazal, there have been shifts in the ways in which the concept of 'public service broadcasting' is understood, and a move towards more consumer-centred programming. BBC2's current (at the time of writing) daytime show *Shopping City* (1999–), hosted by Lowri Turner, is broadcast live on weekdays from Manchester's Trafford Centre shopping complex and is perhaps the most extreme manifestation of this shift. Combining docusoap values (following the lives and loves of the people who work and shop there) with consumer competence challenges, its aim is to teach us how to shop more efficiently.

British makeover shows have quickly shifted from the confines of women's daytime programming to span both daytime and primetime scheduling; significantly, several of these shows have also shifted from BBC2 to the more mainstream BBC1. Typically, primetime shows are broadcast between eight and nine pm, and a cursory examination of the shifts which have taken place in the programming of this slot in the last decade are illuminating. Particularly noticeable has been the 'softening up' of 'hard' programming, for instance the 'soaping' and 'celebrity lifestyling' of the documentary and current affairs programming which has traditionally occupied this slot, the recent spate of hybrid docusoap shows and the broader displacement of 'serious' programming in favour of lifestyle programmes, often in the makeover format. Concomitantly, there are also gendered shifts taking place in the programming of this slot: BBC motoring show *Top Gear* (1978–), which previously explicitly addressed a male television audience, now has a female presenter, and the more recent *Driven* (Channel Four, 1999–) caters pointedly to a car-driving and car-buying female consumer. I am not suggesting that lifestyle-oriented, makeover format shows address an exclusively female audience and that in their expansion from daytime to primetime there has been a radical reorganization of primetime scheduling. Rather, there are interesting shifts going on with regard to gender in the new 'power genre' and the slot it has come to occupy on British primetime television. These shows can be understood as articulations of the shifts taking place in relation to public service broadcasting in Britain, television production and address. This is not absolute: there

is programming in this slot which offers more 'acceptable' forms of knowledge within the lifestyle mode, about antiques, stately homes and tradition, and on the cultural history of DIY and interior design, for instance. *Home Front* (BBC2, 1994–) and its sister show *Home Front in the Garden* (BBC2, 1997–) are interesting, for they carefully privilege 'design', aesthetics and, above all, a universal notion of taste. *Home Front* is a significant programme in the history of this kind of television, as the copy accompanying the first edition of the show in the *Radio Times* suggests:

Statistics show that we are spending more of our leisure time at home, so it is not surprising that home improvement and decoration is becoming one of the nation's most popular activities. Described as offering an intelligent, stylish and accessible insight into the design choices that people make in their homes, this new six-part series is the first magazine-style programme devoted to the subject of interior design.³

While *Home Front* has more recently made use of the makeover format, it has retained its emphasis on restraint, taste and design – this show is not about budget transformations, and its presenter, Tessa Shaw, is resoundingly middle class. While the opening titles of *Changing Rooms* emphasize bright colours and energetic music, use split-screen graphics and, importantly, show people – presenters and participants 'mucking in together' – those of *Home Front* employ slow pans across rooms tastefully decorated in more muted colours, and design details are isolated in the television frame. Human figures are significantly absent, although disembodied hands are fleetingly shown engaged in artistic activity.

The scheduling shifts I have been describing have been discussed in the media in terms of a shift from 'serious' and 'worthy' television to the whimsy of lifestyle programming at primetime, perhaps suggesting that television in this slot has been perceived as having a male address in opposition to the 'feminine' realm of daytime television. In his column on television in *The Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, John Diamond expressed his concerns about 'the nature of modern television presenting' in relation to a new BBC1 daytime show in this mould with female presenters, the 'daytime trifle' *Big Strong Girls* (1999–), describing the show in which they made their names as:

one of those shows in which a band of roving tradespersons turn up on some poor punter's doorstep to demonstrate how far £500 and a modicum of bad taste will go. I've not seen the particular show that Fee and Shiv (as they call each other) were in and so I have only the BBC press office's word that they were stars (*sic*) in and of it, but that word is good enough for me.

And moving on to *Big Strong Girls*:

4 'John Diamond on Television',
The Sunday Telegraph Magazine,
 15 August 1999, p. 47.

In this series the sisters are squeezed into yellow T-shirts and dungarees (they really *are* big strong girls) and sent roaming round the country to humiliate husbands who started putting up the dining room shelves to celebrate Charles and Diana's wedding and haven't yet got round to finishing the job. Were I the snobbish sort, I might point out that most of the unfinished jobs involve the sort of stripped pine and brass-plated tat that the DIY hypermarkets sell off cheap to the ribbon development classes; luckily *de gustibus non est*, as far as this column is concerned, *disputandum* and if people want to clutter up their lean-to conservatories with home-made tongue-and-groove storage modules, who are we to argue?⁴

At issue here, despite the disclaimer, are questions of taste and class, as well as gender. Diamond feels able to judge a show which he has not watched, and makes assumptions not only about those who participate in such shows but also those who watch, in terms of taste and class. The use of a Latin disclaimer and his inclusion of the reader ('who are we to argue') in the class and taste position from which he writes are telling in relation to his dismissal of and disregard for taste cultures which he does not share. What Diamond argues against most explicitly in this piece is what he describes as the 'cult of the ordinary' in contemporary British television, the 'über-ordinariness' by which presenters of lifestyle makeover television become celebrities, and indeed of the programming itself. In the remainder of this essay I want to consider British makeover programming both in relation to the shifts around gender I have suggested, but also in relation to articulations of private and public space and the power, danger and appeal of the moment of revelation which defines the genre. This moment, which foregrounds a potent combination of high emotion and ordinariness through its closeup on the reaction of the 'ordinary' person on television, represents a moment of excess representative of the 'über-ordinariness' (in effect, 'tastelessness') to which Diamond objects on contemporary British television.

Style Challenge

The 'makeover' or transformation of girls and women in terms of fashionable style has been a continuing staple of the woman's film from Bette Davis in *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), through Audrey Hepburn in *Funny Face* (Stanley Donen, 1957) to Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990), but in its 'before and after' format the makeover has long been a key element of feminine beauty culture and a central feature of women's magazines. This prominent trope has often involved an important element of

'Look! You could do this too' – a sense of the accessibility and achievability of celebrity fashionable style for the 'ordinary' woman. The makeover on television presents the viewer with an eagerly awaited yet 'surprise' moment of pleasurable spectacle. This transformation narrative with its moment of spectacular makeover has been almost exclusively associated with women's culture – until now. Makeover shows on British television articulate not just changes in the broadcasting climate and the move towards consumer-driven programming, but also shifts in discourses of gender and their television representation. This has been a particularly interesting feature of *Style Challenge*, the first daytime makeover show on British television.

The evolution of the makeover's most recent manifestation is illuminating: daytime television in its magazine format has always made use of the popularity of the fashion makeover, but until recently this has been confined to small segments. For instance, *This Morning* (ITV, 1988–) with Richard Madeley and Judy Finnegan had a 'Friday Makeover', and GMTV's *Nine O'clock Live* (1993–) with Lorraine Kelly did the same. The makeover is a staple of US talk shows which have often devoted entire shows to making over audience members. Since the advent of *Style Challenge* on British television, however, *This Morning* now features a makeover of some kind almost every day, while *Nine O'clock Live* (now *Lorraine Live*) devoted an entire week's programmes to the makeover of three viewers (all female in both cases). For a while, *This Morning* also adopted the most important spectacular trope of *Style Challenge* – the holding back of the mirror until the end. This is the moment where the presenter says 'there have been no mirrors or reflective materials on set all morning, and __ has'n't seen themselves until now'. Partly what I will argue here is that on British television *Style Challenge* has represented an ungendering of a feature of feminine culture – the makeover – in which wider cultural shifts are articulated. Furthermore, the televisual organization of this show can be linked more specifically to the aesthetic conventions of print journalism dealing with fashion as a way of investigating the specificity of its address.

Public and private space

Deborah Jones, in her frequently cited article on gossip,⁵ locates the spaces where gossip takes place as those belonging to the private and domestic sphere, and those which relate most closely to women's roles both in and outside the home – the house, the hairdresser's, the beauty parlour and the supermarket. I am not convinced that this identification of gossip with the wholly private or 'domestic' space is quite right in the contemporary climate, and this difficulty is

5 Deborah Jones, 'Gossip: notes on women's oral culture', *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, no. 3 (1980), pp. 193–8.

exemplified by the popularity of magazines which are predicated on gossip, such as *Hello*, *Now*, *Here!* and *O.K.*, along with the tabloid press which features shots taken with telephoto lenses to bring the 'private' into closer view and then enable it to be disseminated in the public sphere. Furthermore, the spaces identified by Jones apart from the home are significantly *not* simply identifiable as 'private' space; instead they represent a precarious staging of public space *as* private. A large shopping centre in which I once worked had a hairdressing and beauty salon on the ground floor with plate glass windows opening onto the street. If there was a fire alarm and the building had to be evacuated, women with their hair in curlers, face masks on, sometimes wrapped only in a towel if they were in the middle of a body treatment, would have to file out onto the street. These sites are certainly not as safely private as might be assumed; in fact they quite explicitly address the boundary between private and public space, with one constantly threatening to spill over into the other.

Style Challenge staged this fragile relationship between private and public space in ways which other makeover shows and segments had not, both through the set, and through the relationships set up between the presenter, the 'experts', and the 'challengers'. 'Challenger' and 'team' are the words which the presenters use to introduce the makeover subjects, but these actually refer to earlier programmes in which the show was presented more explicitly as a game show: the experts were told they had twenty minutes to effect the transformation, or to meet the challenge issued by the participants to 'make them stylish', precisely to remove them from the realm of the ordinary. I have settled on the word 'participant' here as it seems to describe most accurately the way in which the show presents their role.⁶

On *Style Challenge*, as with a number of the other shows I have mentioned, the viewer does not simply see the 'before' and 'after' moments, but is privy to most of the process of transformation in an atmosphere of intimacy which is carefully reinforced through the *mise-en-scène*. What is interesting about this format is the way in which it explicitly *foregrounds* the production of the gendered self, the camera privileging details of dress, hair and makeup – panning up and down garments, closeups of buttons or stitching, a makeup brush on the face – and extends this to men and the production of cared-for, well-groomed masculinity. Men are seen in face masks, being introduced to 'grooming' products, having their nails painted and being cared for by other men as well as by women, with the use of closeup frequently also drawing attention to the discomfort of the male makeover participant in being so much on display. The show stages a space which is a complex mixture of a home dressing room, hairdresser's, beauty salon and shop changing room, both in terms of set and ambience. The tables are loaded with hair and beauty

6 The word 'victim' has frequently been offered to me as a more accurate term by male friends and colleagues when discussing this show.

products in the manner of both a dressing table and a salon bench, and there is an area with clothes on display which is somewhere between a personal wardrobe and a shop display rail, but missing from this space is the mirror, which is brought on at the end in the eagerly awaited moment which, as I will suggest, most clearly endangers the distinction between private and public space. While the removal of the mirror is the trope which most noticeably removes the set from the realm of the private by foregrounding the moment of revelation as public spectacle, it also alludes to 'makeover parties' where the victim is not allowed a mirror until the transformation is complete.

The atmosphere promoted by the *mise-en-scene* is that of a group of friends chatting, gossiping, sharing information, background history and personal anecdotes – of mutual self-disclosure – giving advice and offering approval or disapproval in the process. While the presenter talks to the 'expert' about clothes, the audience at home is allowed to hear the hairdryer and chat going on in the background, and the studio audience is encouraged to display its own fashion competence by approving or disapproving of potential stylish alternatives. The central exchange is essentially three-way, between 'expert', presenter and participant. At times, however, it becomes four-way, with the home and studio audience acknowledged and directly addressed at key moments. The show enacts a private space in which the production of a public image is practised, which at the same time – because of the nature of the spaces like the salon and changing room to which it alludes, and because of the acknowledgement of the home and studio audience – is eminently public. The show works hard to disguise this through both set and style of presentation, simultaneously making a strong claim for the ordinariness of both the space and the project.

The walk made by the newly 'madeover' participants from the catwalk to the mirror is the point at which the show suddenly goes 'public' – akin to that moment of coming out of the changing room in a shop. The 'finished article' is put on display for the approval of the audience, and for the person who has been made over. The 'moment in the mirror' is given a big build-up – the viewer is shown the 'before' picture imaged onto the mirror, and the turning of the mirror is accompanied by a drum-roll: it is clearly set up as the climactic spectacle of the show. For instance, if *Style Challenge* features a participant with a beard, the regular viewer knows it will be removed, and this process, in conjunction with the revelation of the participant's new face both to us and to himself, gradually becomes a familiar pleasure. This 'moment in the mirror' is a simultaneously private and public revelation of the new image; the ordinary person, the audience member becomes extra-ordinary or indeed 'über-ordinary' televisual spectacle, and the moment in the mirror is a condensation of this altered relationship. The participant,

a previous audience member, sees themselves transformed, as does the current audience, which in turn elicits more requests for makeovers. This moment where the private experience and the public display collapse and merge foregrounds the makeover participant's reaction to their new look, the camera zooming into a medium or full closeup as the transformation is revealed. This moment offers a space for empathy and aspiration in its address to the boundary between home audience member and television programme participant and the spaces they occupy (do other people, as I do, also watch this show in the bedroom?), and it is this that the show plays on by including studio and home audience in the dressing-room ambience it constructs.

More recently, much of the power of the BBC's critically acclaimed realist sitcom *The Royle Family* (1998–) came from the way in which the show attempted to set up precisely this relationship between home audience, television audience and the ordinary person on television. The series showcased the relationships of a working-class family in the North of England, generally pictured sitting in front of the television set in their living room (and who in one episode were watching and commenting on *Changing Rooms*). The camera was often placed in the position of the television set, and the audience at home appeared to gaze in at itself watching television and indeed being on television. The making of a public spectacle from a private moment in the makeover show's moment of revelation to its subject is the key trope of the genre and is, not only in *Style Challenge*, the point at which the shows' negotiation of the private and the public threatens to break open – where emotion, feelings and anger threaten to explode in closeup. More precisely, these programmes showcase a kind of threatening excess by and of the ordinary, in terms of both taste and emotion, which is at the heart of reactions to this kind of programming such as that cited above. The potential danger of this moment which television might not quite contain, despite its careful orchestration by both the format of the show (the moment comes at the end) and the performance of the presenter, is the source of the power and pleasure of these shows, but is quickly recuperated through more chat, and frequently tears, on the part of the makeover participant. We are immediately shifted away from the public stage and back into the safety of the dressing room.

This address to the division between public and private, along with the collapse of the distinction between audience member and televisual spectacle, is part of the more general cultural phenomenon of the increasing obsession with celebrity lifestyles. This context has surely contributed to the current makeover mania on television – as part of a general ethos of 'you can be like them' or 'they're not so different from you'. *Nine O'clock Live* makeovers have frequently centred on making a viewer look like their favourite celebrity, and

7 *Ready, Steady, Cook* (BBC1, 1994–) recently shifted to an additional primetime slot for its celebrity version of the 'ordinary' daytime show: *Celebrity Ready, Steady, Cook* (BBC1, 1997–).

Stars in Their Eyes (1990–), ITV's Saturday night makeover show in the same time slot, foregrounds precisely the aspiration and achievement of the ordinary person. Each segment begins with a short film of that person in their day-to-day routine at home and work, before their spectacular transformation into and performance of their chosen celebrity singer. Here again, the divisions are breaking down. *Style Challenge* performs makeovers on celebrities and personalities as well as 'ordinary' people,⁷ and the 'experts' are introduced as 'top celebrity hairdresser' and 'makeup artist to the stars': it is becoming increasingly difficult, however, to decide who the 'celebrities' are – it is as likely to be the audience member or the stylist as the presenter. Concomitantly, as Diamond suggests, presenters are more 'ordinary'. There are simply more ordinary people on television.

Style Challenge accords its 'experts' the status of friendly advisers as well as professionals, both by the kind of chat which is foregrounded, through the detailed presentation of the process of transformation and through the staging of the set. It is clearly more akin to a 'private' space than the more public studio set of the other shows which perform makeovers on people rather than spaces; the audience is only addressed by the presenter at pivotal moments – beginning, middle and end – and then in an 'inclusive' way. The show's manipulation of the relationship between private and public space through the creation of intimacy is particularly notable in comparison with *Afternoon Live* (1997), a magazine programme which was for a period in 1997 broadcast concurrently with *Style Challenge*, Tuesday to Thursday afternoons on ITV. The fashion segment was presented by designer David Emanuel (most famous for creating, with his wife, Princess Diana's wedding dress). He presided over makeovers, consumer competence challenges – where a shopper was pitted against an expert to identify the most expensive garment amongst three through the use of visual skills only – and the 'fashion dash'. In this challenge, Emanuel planted a red-herring outfit among a selection from which a woman had sixty seconds to choose one which suited her – the point of the exercise being to see if she got it wrong. The particular construction of Emanuel as expert on *Afternoon Live* was difficult in the context of the show's address, which was quite specifically to a female audience in the home. Emanuel's celebrity persona was a problematic fit with the ethos of the show – he projected an aura of professional design expertise and class privilege which was entirely inappropriate to the address of the show – he simply wasn't ordinary enough to pull it off. A particularly difficult moment had Emanuel make over a woman at the request of her teenage daughter, who was embarrassed by what she saw as her mother's inappropriate *Dynasty*-style of dress. A few shows later, Emanuel had been replaced by a female 'expert' who was filmed in the bedroom of the participant, sitting on the bed and

making over her wardrobe in an intimate atmosphere similar to that produced by *Style Challenge*.

An interesting counterpoint to *Style Challenge*, *Looking Good* is a BBC2 primetime show looking at fashion and beauty, and clearly within the new 'factual entertainment' category. Presented by Lowri Turner, the show addresses an audience of women: the opening titles of the show place the camera as the fourth, mirrored wall of a dress-shop changing room and a succession of 'ordinary' women of varying age and size peer at themselves in the mirror of the camera as they try on garments. There is a clear attempt, as with *Style Challenge*, to suggest a closeness between the viewer at home and the concerns of the show – the first edition claimed that the series would look at 'real fashion for real women'. More recently, both *Looking Good* and Channel Four's fashion and shopping series *She's Gotta Have It* have featured editions devoted to men – *Looking Good for Men* and *He's Gotta Have It* – a clear instance of the way in which the gendering of the programming of the eight-to-nine pm slot is shifting. This is surely less a feminization of primetime programming than an ungendering of the discourses and spaces which have traditionally occupied daytime and primetime British television. *The Naked Chef* (BBC 1999–) hosted by cool young chef Jamie Oliver, uses pop video aesthetics, pop slang ('pukka peaches mate') and above all demonstrates that 'real lads' do cook.

When it began, *Style Challenge* was unique in that it performed makeovers on celebrities and ordinary folk, women *and* men. The address of the show has not been gender specific and is indicative of more general cultural shifts around gendered expertise and the aesthetic conventions of fashion print journalism. On *Style Challenge*, a trope which has been considered a staple of 'feminine culture' – the makeover and the spaces in which it traditionally takes place – is recontextualized and opened up to men as well as women, as both participants and presenters. This is suggestive of a more general cultural shift through which it is now okay for men to use moisturiser and talk knowledgeably about fashion and style. This is observable in the recent increase in men's magazines dealing specifically with style and health. The terrain is shifting and is becoming shared, and it is no longer proper to talk about 'feminine culture' in quite the same way as it was fifteen to twenty years ago. On *Style Challenge*, presenter John Leslie can talk comfortably and knowledgeably about the recent vogue for 'big knickers', and Oz Clarke (of *Food and Drink* [1982–]) can feel fabrics and happily discuss the benefits of Lycra – a contrast to such earlier examples as Richard Madeley on *This Morning* trying to talk about gynaecological problems and mistaking just how frank he could be when discussing his wife's personal health. *Arena*, 'The Original Magazine for Men', in September 1996 featured a fashion spread called 'Softlad', with a man wearing just a pink cashmere sweater

8 Sean Nixon, in *Hard Looks: Masculinities, Spectatorship and Contemporary Consumption* (London: UCL Press, 1996), p. 202, examines the cultural significance of the 'new man' imagery in the 1980s, the conditions of its emergence, production and circulation. He suggests that it has represented 'a particular loosening of the binary opposition between gay and straight-identified men and [has] extended the space available within the representational regimes of popular consumption for an ambivalent masculine sexual identity'.

9 This distinction is of course not absolute – I overstate the contrast here for the sake of argument; however, it can be demonstrated that this is a general division in the aesthetic conventions of men's and women's fashion journalism. A similar complexity of aesthetic can be found in the display of, for instance, electronic gadgets and sports gear in men's journalism. (Thanks to the members of the Popular British Cinema and Television Research Seminar at De Montfort University, Leicester for this observation.) While in some ways I am arguing here that *Style Challenge* has a 'masculinized' aesthetic, I suggest this specifically in relation to the gendered aesthetic conventions of fashion print journalism that I outline above, which speaking to competences which are not essentially gendered but are socially, culturally and historically produced as such.

and brown leather mules; and Jamie Oliver, with his softly curling blonde hair and repeated construction as ideal uncle, brother, lover and best friend, is the perfect articulation of these shifts.⁸

The television fashion aesthetic

I want to consider the aesthetics of *Style Challenge* and *Looking Good* in more detail in relation to gender-specific conventions of address in fashion journalism. How exactly do these shows offer an address to their audience through their textual strategies, and how do they gender fashion and the private spaces previously considered wholly part of the feminine domain for television?

Comparing equivalent 'art' fashion pages from a quality women's and men's journal will show that the aesthetic is not dissimilar: there is complex work to be done in deciphering which descriptive text relates to which part of the image – they are often very complex, with more than one human figure to a page. The pages in women's magazines are frequently made more difficult or complex because they include makeup credits, and this involves looking between different parts of the face and the text, picking out tiny details and relating them to the credits. Often, the credits for the images appear in a directory towards the end of the volume, which means flipping back and forth whilst keeping an eye on both.

If we consider the way *Style Challenge* presents the viewer with the same information, we can see that the television aesthetic in effect performs this quite complex reading process for us through the use of camera movement and onscreen graphics. The camera pans up the body and the corresponding information for each part of the body is given in boxed-in graphics on screen. It is linear, simple and easy to follow. This is determined primarily by the demands of television – to show information clearly and quickly. However, a significant distinction can be drawn by examining the aesthetics or layout of equivalent fashion 'information' rather than 'art' pages. Such material in a women's magazine is typically still elaborate in layout and difficult to read efficiently – it takes a certain familiarity with the conventions of looking and reading for key details – while fashion pages with a similar 'information' address in men's glossies are typically pared down, simple and linear for ease of reference. This comparison, which it might be said reveals a carefully differentiated address within the aesthetic of fashion print journalism to what are seen as gendered competences, seems productive.⁹ *Looking Good* offers an interesting point of contrast. The show frequently uses stop-motion photography so that, for instance, garments magically appear, unfold and arrange themselves on screen, and 'arty' intertitles, creating a more complex relationship between image and voiceover which requires greater work on the part of the audience. The style of

presentation of fashion information on this show produces a fancier aesthetic, for instance, than that of *Style Challenge*, and one more akin to the 'feminine' format of the fashion pages of women's glossy magazines. This show has a marked feminine address, produced in part then by its televisual aesthetic. The show has occasionally featured 'male' segments and adjusted its aesthetic accordingly. For instance, in an interview with a man interested in grooming and skincare products, the display of products was accompanied by pop music and presented through fast pans and grainy black and white images. The example of *Looking Good* makes it clear that the televisual fashion aesthetic is not of necessity that exemplified by *Style Challenge*. In this respect, the more inclusive project of *Style Challenge* is articulated through the show's ungendered fashion aesthetic.

Frank Mort in his *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* examines the address to a new consumer in the 1980s: 'the creation of a distinctive market aimed at young men',¹⁰ noting that 'the intensified scrutiny of men often resulted in the consolidation of a world-view which marginalized or excluded femininity'.¹¹ Looking back to the mid 1950s, described as a key moment of change for the men's clothing industry,¹² before the 'peacock revolution' in men's fashion which reached its peak in the 'Swinging London' of the 1960s, Mort considers the earlier opening of a new branch of Burton's the menswear retailer in Devizes, Wiltshire in September 1953:

There were magnificent displays of cloth 'in the piece', as well as a vast array of folded garments. *But there was no air of clutter or fussiness. Clean masculine lines were the order of the day.*

Upstairs in the changing rooms, special mirrors had been installed to enable customers to gaze at themselves in an all-round view, in complete privacy.¹³

Mort observes further that 'Burton's approach to retailing was premised on the exclusion of women and all associations of feminine culture'.¹⁴ While clearly, *Style Challenge* in many ways demonstrates through its format and content the significant shifts which have since taken place around men's grooming and fashionable style, particularly, perhaps, in the show's mixed-gender profile of participants and 'experts' (with female stylists dressing men, for instance, and men grooming other men), it seems that in its pared-down aesthetic it bears the residue of this earlier moment, representing an 'ungendering' of the spaces and discourses previously associated exclusively with feminine culture. Similarly, just as *Looking Good* adjusts its aesthetic for a male address, 'hardens' it up, so to speak, male makeovers on *Style Challenge* are often performed while the man being made over talks about his work. In one makeover which featured facial massage and moisturising

¹⁰ Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 7

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 132

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 135. Emphasis mine

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 138

- 15 *This Life* (BBC2, Series One, 1996; Series Two, 1997), the cult documentary-style late-night 'adult soap' was perhaps the first on British television where men were allowed a (public) private space – however knowingly, the second series followed Miles and Joe to the beauty parlour for facials, manicures and pedicures, and showed us shared moments in the bathroom.



Figs 4–6: male grooming on *Style Challenge* (BBC Birmingham).

- 16 Bishop, 'A life of leisure', p. 23

- 17 Karen Lury, 'Television performance: being, acting and corpsing', *New Formations*, no. 26 (1995), pp. 114–27

techniques performed on the participant by men's skincare expert Daniel Sandler, the subject of the makeover talked about his day job – re-enacting medieval battles and jousting tournaments – while he was shown in closeup, being massaged and having his hair styled (figures 4–6). In spite of the show's mise-en-scene, and augmented by the revealing three-dimensional view of the television camera and the potentially endless replay of home video recording, the private 'all-round' mirror described by Mort has most definitely moved from the 'complete privacy' of the upstairs fitting room to centre stage of a very public arena.¹⁵ Such strategies work to counteract the danger of publicly foregrounding the details of men's personal grooming and dress in the closeup and spectacular way that *Style Challenge* does.

I want to suggest that in its play with private and public space, and in its attempts to ungender discourses of fashion and style, *Style Challenge* represents a significant moment in the development of 'makeover' television – from fashion makeover 'slots' to the current flourishing of full-blown makeover shows. When I began writing, the focus of the makeover show was shifting from fashion to DIY, and as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, the most popular and high-profile of these DIY shows has been BBC's *Changing Rooms*, which features neighbours making over a room in each other's homes with a budget of £500 (clearly the show to which Diamond is referring). The key moment in this show – or as the presenter Carol Smillie put it at the National Television Awards, 'the best bit' – is the reaction of each set of neighbours when they initially open their eyes on their transformed rooms. As producer Peter Bazalgette put it: 'The key is the resolution, whether they like it or hate it ... the show is really about watching other people in the raw'.¹⁶ The show builds unashamedly towards this climactic moment, having the presenter ask each couple in the course of the show what would be the worst thing that could be done to their room: we are rarely disappointed in our desire for/fear of a horrified or ambiguous response – *Changing Rooms* often seems tailored to 'worst-case scenarios'. While the shift to DIY as a focus for the makeover show might seem in some ways to represent a shift out of the purely private or personal realm, in fact the combination of DIY and interior decor seems to address precisely a mixed gender audience, while *Changing Rooms*' climactic moment of revelation is significantly akin to the *Style Challenge* 'moment in the mirror'. In both cases the closeup display of the knee-jerk reaction of the ordinary person becomes a primary public spectacle, and it is in this moment of excess that the essential difference between makeover shows and the cookery/lifestyle/consumer competence programmes to which they are generically related resides.

Karen Lury has written interestingly about the performance of the ordinary person on television,¹⁷ arguing that the audience experiences

anxiety for and/or antagonism towards the ordinary person on television, anticipating their mistakes – for instance ‘corpsing’ or breaking the frame. The form of popular British makeover shows to an extent confounds the categories upon which Lury bases this observation, not to invalidate, but rather to intensify the effect she describes. While the expert status accorded David Emanuel on *Afternoon Live* meant precisely that everyone was waiting for the ‘ordinary’ woman to get it wrong – although we might in that case have been extremely sympathetic towards her – we have a different relation to the participants on *Style Challenge* and *Changing Rooms*: we are invited into the intimacy of the dressing room/living room/bedroom and asked to participate. British makeover shows exploit television’s potential for intimacy, familiarity, ordinariness and the radical destabilization of the division between public and private, and offer the home audience a space in which they might not just anxiously witness the moment of revelation, but might empathize – to put themselves in their place, watching through spread fingers, much as the makeover participant approaches their new look/room/garden.

Lury also asks: ‘if real people convincingly “put on an act”, where can sincerity, authenticity and real emotion be located with any conviction?’,¹⁸ and suggests that corpsing reveals the television performer as ‘live, uncontrolled and expressive’, precisely what the television audience hopes for, an instant in which communication – a bond between performer and viewer promised by television – is delivered.¹⁹ Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt, in arguing that ‘public access to and participation in the mass media represents a challenge to expertise’,²⁰ also suggest that as ‘ordinary people’ become increasingly adept at communicating on television through their familiarity with participatory programming, then ‘members of the public may have difficulty in speaking in public and maintaining authenticity’.²¹ Whereas previously the mere presence of the ‘ordinary person’ on television was a site where the ‘authentic’ might be discovered, if Livingstone and Lunt are correct in suggesting that this is no longer the case, then new strategies are required through which this authenticity and affect might be produced. Celebrity presenter Cilla Black’s latest Saturday evening offering *Moment of Truth* (1998–) challenges an adult member of a family which includes children to master a skill within seven days (for example, father has to learn to keep three hula hoops spinning for several minutes) and then demonstrate this skill ‘live’ in the studio without error. The family are shown the prizes they will take home (a car, a holiday and so on) if the attempt is successful, which it rarely is. Again, this moment of (usually) failure is shown through closeups on faces as the parent fails to provide for the family: as the trailer repeats ‘the camera never lies at the moment of truth’. The conventions of representing the ‘real’ on television have become entirely familiar to

18 Ibid., p. 126.

19 Ibid., p. 127.

20 Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt, *Talk on Television: Audience Participation and Public Debate* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 98.

21 Ibid., p. 97.

- 22 Tania Modleski, 'The rhythms of reception: daytime television and women's work', in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – an Anthology*, (Los Angeles, CA: AFI, 1983), p. 70.

us – the hand-held camera, the 'home video' look and the fish-eye lens of the camera 'concealed' high in the corner of the room which are used on *Changing Rooms*, for example – and indeed it is questionable whether they retain their ability to authenticate. In such a climate, a profound desire for intensity and authenticity surely precisely explains the appeal of shows such as *Style Challenge* and *Changing Rooms*, premised as they are upon a central moment of apparently unmediated, unedited response, a guarantee of intensity and authenticity produced through the negotiation effected by both shows of private and public space akin to the moment of corpsing described by Lury. Makeover shows ask us as viewers to draw upon our repertoire of personal skills, our ability to search faces and discern reactions (facilitated by the closeup) from the smallest details – the twitch of a muscle, an expression in the eye – a competence suggested by Tania Modleski as key to the pleasure of soap opera's melodramatic form.²² These programmes showcase the threatening excessiveness of the ordinary – from issues of taste in interior decoration, to bra-less Charlie Dimmock digging the garden, to climactic moments of revelation. These are, precisely, instances of powerful, spectacular 'über-ordinariness': an excess of the ordinary. These are private moments, publicly showcased, in which reactions are unpredictable despite television's strategies for containing them. The struggles to disguise reactions readable on faces shown in extreme closeup are completely compelling, but somehow *almost* too uncomfortable to watch; makeover shows collapse public and private space, and can destabilize the discrete identities of viewer and participant. There is potential dis-ease in sharing in the excess of the ordinary they produce, and sometimes the safest response may be a retreat into a position of class- and taste-based superiority.

This paper draws on work developed through membership of the Midlands Television Research Group.

research note:

The pleasures of 'home cinema', or watching movies on telly: an audience study of cinephiliac VCR use

UMA DINSMORE-TULI

Today in Britain more movies are watched on videotape at home than are seen projected on 35mm film in cinemas.¹ What happens to the dynamics of reception when such public media texts are consumed in private? Can film still be enjoyed as 'film' when viewed on a television screen? How far do existing theories of cinematic and televisual spectatorship account for the particular domestic pleasures of watching videotapes of feature films originally intended for theatrical exhibition?

This paper draws upon the findings of a small-scale qualitative audience research project to address these questions.² The twenty interviewees and seventy questionnaire respondents who took part in this research all identified themselves as people who were 'passionate about cinema' and who enjoyed collecting and watching movies at home on videotape. They found out about the project through advertising in regional repertory cinemas, the National Film Theatre and a letter in *Home Entertainment* magazine. With reference both to the brief responses provided through the questionnaire survey, and to the more detailed comments made at interview, I use the experiences

1 *British Video Association Yearbook* (London: British Video Association, 1997), p. 83; Report of Findings, *Cinema and Video Industry Audience Research*, vol. 3, no. 10 (London: Cinema Advertisers Associations, 1993), p. 82.

2 Uma Dinsmore-Tuli, 'The domestication of film: video, cinephilia and the collecting and viewing of videotapes in the home' (Goldsmiths' College, University of London, PhD thesis, 1998).

- 3 There are a few exceptions which include some specific references to the viewing of movies on videotape: see Ann Gray, *Video Playtime* (London: Routledge, 1992); Marie Gillespie, 'Sacred serials, devotional viewing and domestic worship', in Robert Allen (ed.), *To Be Continued: Soap Operas Around the World* (London: Routledge, 1994); Valerie Walkerdine, 'Video replay: families, films, and fantasies', in Victor Burgin et al. (eds), *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Methuen, 1992); Julian Wood, 'Repeatable pleasures: notes on young people's use of video', in David Buckingham (ed.), *Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); the studies in Julia Dobrow (ed.), *Social and Cultural Aspects of VCR Use* (Hove and London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1990) are based on quantitative studies.
- 4 Charles Shiro Tashiro, 'Videophilia: what happens when you wait for it on video', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 1 (1991), pp. 10–11.
- 5 David Ehrenstein, 'Film in the age of video', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 3 (1996), pp. 38–42; Tim deLisle, 'An unhealthy intimacy with violence', *Independent on Sunday*, 11 June 1995, p. 27; Geoff Wood, 'Frenzies of the visible', *Economy and Society*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1992), pp. 58–74.
- 6 John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, second edition (London: Routledge, 1992).
- 7 David Docherty et al., *The Last Picture Show? Britain's Changing Film Audiences* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), p. 69.

of this small group of British cinephile video users to investigate the range of viewing strategies which are usually associated with video, particularly the emphasis upon extensive use of remote controls to fragment the film text. This paper explores how the VCR can offer film-loving viewers a range of domestic cinephiliac pleasures which blur the distinctions previously drawn between cinematic and domestic viewing registers.

Assumed characteristics of VCR viewing

The paucity of qualitative empirical research into the viewing strategies and registers actually used by VCR viewers has led most writers on the subject to draw generalized, abstract and often technologically determined conclusions about the ways in which videotapes are watched.³ It has become a commonplace, for example, to assume that because VCRs afford the capacity to fast-forward, rewind or pause tapes this means that video viewing is inevitably characterized by a constant state of flux and fragmentation as the viewer physically manipulates the flow of the taped text. Assumptions made about the nature of video viewing rest upon the perception that there is a necessary and inevitable progression from the existence of remote-control facilities for tape control, to viewers' use of these options: such a presumption fails to recognize that the viewer is at liberty to choose *not* to use such options.

In a highly dramatic account of the damage inflicted upon narrative film culture by the perceived segmenting and fragmenting tendencies of videodisk and videotape, Charles Tashiro likens the capacities for text manipulation offered by videotape and videodisk to 'guns that destroy the temple [of the narrative feature film] by . . . breaking the flow of a film into sides, segmenting the programming into 'chapters', halting it altogether with freeze frames'.⁴ He arrives at his rather alarmist interpretation by tracing links and assumptions commonly made by other writers on video, including Ehrenstein, deLisle and Wood.⁵ A similar train of thought is, although expressed in more measured tones, clearly followed in the second edition of John Ellis's influential study of the moving image, *Visible Fictions*.⁶ All of these writers identify remote-control use and textual fragmentation as a key characteristic of VCR viewing and present the video audience experience as an essentially anti-cinematic activity that involves 'Stopping the film and breaking the narrative, or rewinding and repeating the narrative, break[ing] all the rules of watching a film in the cinema'.⁷

It is striking that such anti-narrative, anti-cinematic viewing strategies correspond neither to those used by the particular group of cinephiles whom I interviewed, nor to any of the respondents who answered the questionnaire: fragmented viewing is the exception for

these people rather than the norm. Acknowledging the limited and highly particular nature of the cinephiliac informants to whom I refer, it is inappropriate to draw general conclusions from their responses. Instead, the following analysis presents a particular mode of video viewing as a 'lived experience'⁸ rather than an abstract concept: it offers an account, based upon the stories which I have been told and the observations which I have made, of the ways in which a certain group of cinephiliac viewers engage with their videotapes and their VCR remote control panels.

Repeat viewing

I asked the video viewers who took part in my research to tell me about the ways they watched their tapes. Questionnaire enquiries were of a practical nature, requiring simple 'yes', 'no' or multiple choice responses; for more lengthy answers to reflective 'why' questions, I waited until the interview stage. Questionnaires and interviews both enquired particularly about repeat viewing, and also asked informants how they viewed tapes which they were watching for the first time.

Repeated viewing emerged as an extremely widespread tactic. Sixty-eight out of seventy people (97.1%) who answered the questionnaire's enquiry about repeat viewing stated that there were tapes in their collections which they had watched more than once, and only two out of seventy claimed never to have re-viewed any of their tapes. The frequency of re-viewing varied quite considerably across the four options given on the questionnaire: the most popular option was between four and six times, with twenty-seven people (38.6%) identifying this as an accurate reflection of the average number of times they had viewed repeatedly-watched tapes.

In relation to the question of viewing methods for both repeatedly-viewed tapes and first-time screenings, the options provided for describing viewing strategies in both questions were:

- a) uninterrupted and complete
- b) fast-forward at some points
- c) rewind at some points
- d) pause at some points
- e) freeze frame at some points.

A further option, f), offered respondents the opportunity to describe any other ways of viewing which they may have adopted. Of the seventy people who completed the questionnaire, sixty-four (91.4%) replied that during the first viewing of a tape they would watch a movie uninterrupted and completely. Of the other options, only the use of the 'pause' control was checked by five respondents.

Surprisingly, this overwhelming preference for uninterrupted and complete viewings was also evident in the responses to questions

about viewing strategies adopted in cases where viewers had *already seen the films before*: here forty-eight out of seventy people (68.6%) replied that they would watch uninterruptedly and completely. Only one person stated that they would use the rewind control during a repeat viewing, three opted for fast-forwarding at some points, and four identified that they sometimes used the pause control. Although, as I indicate above, many writers characterize video viewing by the use of remote controls to fast-forward, rewind and pause tapes, the questionnaire responses demonstrated that for this particular group of cinephile video viewers such a mode of viewing was extremely unusual, even in cases where the films had been seen before. At the level of purely quantitative analysis of the responses made by this group of cinephiles, the evidence in favour of a preferred mode of undisturbed 'cinematic'-type viewing of videotape is persuasive.

The general picture of preference for uninterrupted viewing which emerged from the questionnaire respondents was also true of the group of interviewees. All but three selected the uninterrupted category to describe their preferred repeat viewing strategies, and all but one of them chose the same category to describe the way that they viewed movies for the first time. From the interview responses there emerged a particular set of reasons and personal explanations for this favouring of uninterrupted viewing. These reasons can be grouped most helpfully into two connected clusters, those related to the experience of intense and concentrated pleasure in the film that enables the viewer to acquire detailed knowledge of the text, and those related to the viewer's expression of respect for the film. The latter promotes the former, whilst the former often deepens the experience of the latter. Both categories are related to the significance which narrative plays in the experience of uninterrupted viewing, and both are experienced during first-time and repeat viewings.

Julia Dobrow has identified repeat viewing of familiar texts on video as one of the most popular general uses of the VCR.⁹ Movies, she claims, head the list of videocassette material which is re-viewed most frequently, and 'education', in so far as viewers claim to 'get more out' of movies in repeat viewing, is cited by her as one of the major appeals of repetitive VCR use. Repeat viewing was widely used by the people whom I interviewed as a means to acquire knowledge of favourite and classic texts. For example, when I asked thirty-five-year-old website author Jim why he and his partner Tess had watched *Palm Beach Story* (Preston Sturges, US, 1942) repeatedly, and with as 'few interruptions as possible' (369),¹⁰ he spoke about the sheer weight of detail and rapidity of dialogue which characterized the film, observing: 'you can find new things in them when you re-watch them . . . you just can't take it all in the first time – you find jokes that you've forgotten about or you hadn't noticed the first time' (347). Tess and Jim's friend Nicole, a local

9 Julia R. Dobrow, 'The rerun ritual: using VCRs to re-view', in Dobrow (ed.), *Social and Cultural Aspects of VCR Use*, p. 186.

10 Numbers in parenthesis refer to interview transcripts. All names are aliases.

government employee in her mid thirties, also associated her pleasure in repeat viewing with the acquisition of knowledge about her favourite texts. She made it clear that such knowledge came not only from repeat viewings but from screenings that were uninterrupted and complete: 'I like to see the whole thing, to see how it all works' (271). The chance to discover more about a favourite film was also cited by twenty-six-year-old clinical research scientist Pete as a chief motivation for repeat viewings, although his concern was less for dialogue than for special effects, stunts, continuity errors, cinematography and editing:

I like to go and watch a film and enjoy it, and then I'll watch it again and dissect it down. . . . I can watch them over and over again. Just to enjoy them and see how they've been put together. . . . You get to see different things. You get to see how the whole set has been placed. Everything, the table that isn't supposed to be there, you can see, how the director's brought you into longer shots, how he can take you a lot faster, with very fast editing (59, 60)

Jim, Nicole and Pete all articulated their experiences of the pleasures of the repeat viewing as a means to learn more about their tapes, but the nature of the knowledge which they sought to acquire from repeated viewings differed according to the types of film which they preferred. For Tess, Jim and Nicole, whose collecting preferences were largely for pre-1950s movies, the process of discovering how a film 'worked' was clearly related to dialogue and performance, but for Pete, who mostly enjoyed action adventure films with big special effects, the focus of attention during knowledge-acquiring repeat viewings was on the mise-en-scene and sound effects. Although the distinctive modes of knowledge acquired through repeat viewings can be seen to be shaped by the genre of the favoured texts, these genre-led distinctions seem to be relatively subtle differences, since the chief motivating factor in this type of re-viewing, regardless of the genre of the movie concerned, is the acquisition of more knowledge about the film through repeated exposure to it. In all cases, this process of acquiring such knowledge is experienced as a pleasurable activity.

Complete and uninterrupted viewing

Across genre distinctions, the pleasurable nature of the acquisition of knowledge about repeatedly viewed film texts always depended upon those repeat viewings being complete and uninterrupted.¹¹ In all the interviews, I made a point of playing devil's advocate when I enquired about people's motivation for devotedly re-viewing favourite films all the way through. 'So if you know that you really

11 For an account of the process of distinguishing between 'classics' and 'favourites', see Dinsmore-Tuli, 'The domestication of film', and Sean French *The Terminator* (London: British Film Institute, 1996).

enjoy that particular scene' I would ask, 'why don't you just fast-forward to it?' Without exception, every one of the interviewees dismissed this suggestion as an inconceivable injury or disrespectful slight to inflict upon a favoured film. When I persisted by asking 'What's the point of watching all the way through when you've already seen it before and you know where the best bits are? Why not use the remote to zap through?', then interviewees would patiently, eloquently and occasionally passionately explain the importance of preserving the unity of the film text during video viewing. Simon, a forty-two-year-old computer security worker, adamantly asserted that 'The only things I fast-forward are television programmes' (156), while thirty-four-year-old telecommunications engineer Matt joked that the only things he fast-forwarded were adverts (353). All of the interviewees expressed preferences for off-air recordings in which adverts were either absent, or edited out at the time of recording. Simon's dismissal of fast-forwarding as a tactic suited only to the 'lesser' medium of television, conveyed very clearly the interviewees' general sense that 'zipping through' was simply an inappropriate way to engage with movies on tape: 'I don't think I'd do that with any film. What's the point of sitting and watching and then fast-forwarding?' (156). When I pursued the matter further by asking about the possibilities of immediately re-viewing a particularly enjoyable scene, Simon expressed with certainty his belief that he would never employ the rewind control: 'No, no. I'd watch the whole film again. The whole point is that it builds up to that, so what's the point of showing that one scene?' (160) His comments were typical of the whole sample's response.

In relation to preferred tapes, the understanding of 'uninterrupted' as meaning 'advert-free' was shared by all respondents. Even those viewers who had claimed that they did not ever use any remote control facilities defined the use of fast-forward to minimize advert interference not just as an acceptable 'interruption' but also as a necessary tactic to facilitate a complete and respectful viewing. In this sense, the use of remote control as a way to 'complete' the text occurs in a manner quite distinct from Julian Wood's observations that fast-forward or 'spinning' can be used to skip tedious segments and intensify a flaccid narrative¹². On the contrary, rather than the viewer 're-making' or improving upon a text by altering its contents through fast-forward-as-editing, this application of the remote control panel re-forms the disjointed text according to its makers' perceived original intentions. Such use of the remote control panel is the paradoxical exception that proves the general 'no remote' rule: far from fragmenting the film text, the remote control panel is used here to re-connect the separated segments of a forcibly partitioned movie.

12 Wood, 'Repeatable pleasures'.

Respectful engagement

So little writing about videotape viewing has taken the uninterrupted aspect of the activity into account, and so much attention has been directed towards the speculative notion of the fragmented video text, that it is difficult to uncover many useful critical formulations of the nature of uninterrupted viewings of cinematic texts in domestic situations. Marie Gillespie offers an extremely rare set of reflections in her analysis of the viewing of videotapes of Hindi mythological movies by a family of Indian immigrants living in Southall.

Describing the degree of uninterrupted, focused attention with which the Dhani family watched videotapes both of Indian feature films about the lives of Hindu Gods and the Doordarshan television serialization of the epic *Mahabharata*, she observes that: 'once a "god film" has been put on it has to be watched until the end', and she draws comparisons between the respect demonstrated by a disciple for their spiritual teacher and that evidenced by the viewers for their videotapes, particularly in relation to a dedication to complete viewing: 'a devotee would not stand up and leave his or her guru in mid-sentence'.¹³

Although the viewing matter preferred by the interviewees in this study is quite distinct from that watched in Gillespie's example, the nature of the viewing experiences which she describes have very many close parallels with those experiences described by the cinephiles whom I interviewed. Gillespie's account of the shared focus and equally attentive viewing registers of the different members of the Dhani family provide an interesting supplement to those studies of family viewing situations in which gender-differentiated viewing registers have been observed.¹⁴ Her observations of the Dhanis reveal possible alternatives to the assumed range of viewing registers available in the domestic viewing situation, and her analogy between 'devotional viewing' and religious worship has a valuable resonance at the level of the deep respect for films and filmmakers which all the cinephiles expressed. Kath, a thirty-eight-year-old ex-receptionist who had turned her amateur love of film into a professional commitment by becoming a full-time film student, spoke for all the interviewees when she told me that:

I think you should afford to the film the sort of respect that a work of art demands, whether it's a work of art or whether it's a piece of entertainment, and watch it as it was intended to be seen, in its entirety (295).

Not only did interviewees frequently express their *preference* for uninterrupted viewings, but they also articulated an acute sense of necessity of the uninterrupted and complete viewing as a means of acquiring knowledge about films. This was linked by most interviewees to their feelings of devoted respect for the films which

¹³ Gillespie, 'Sacred serials', pp. 356, 362.

¹⁴ David Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure* (London: Comedia, 1986); Gray, *Video Playtime*.

they viewed. Appreciation of directorial or cinematographic skill was also closely linked to a sense that the particular achievements of the director or cinematographer could only be fully understood through complete viewing. Uninterrupted viewing was widely regarded as a prerequisite for respectful viewing, and many interviewees expressed their belief that it was not possible to judge a film without having watched it all the way through. There emerged an intimate relation between respect for narrative structure and respect for the wider activities of filmmakers. Nicole put this very clearly when she explained 'How can I say that I've seen it, and say I didn't like it if I didn't watch the whole thing?' (287), whilst twenty-nine-year-old journalist Douglas stated that: 'I try to watch all the way through to give it a fair shake' (119). Kath's articulation of this point was typical of many interviewees' feelings about this: 'I think that it's unfair to disrupt the narrative. . . . I think it's fair [to watch without fast forwarding], you can't pass a judgement on the film until you watch it like that . . . it's not fair to the film' (295). The comments made by Leonard, who at seventy-three was the oldest interviewee, conveyed very explicitly the perception of how the compulsive power of the narrative was to be regarded as an expression of the skills of the director:

I hate interruptions in films . . . if the film is worth watching he takes you at the beginning, and he leads you, the director, this is, he knows what he's doing, he gets your attention very quickly, and then you're with him all the way. And if anything interrupts you've got to start all over again, it's just not fair to him (229).

The reflections offered by Andy, a twenty-six-year-old postgraduate film researcher, took a slightly different and illuminating perspective on the same thoughts. Explaining why he preferred to view a favourite film uninterrupted and completely he said that for him, to watch a film using fast-forward and rewind facilities was an 'ego-centred pleasure' (113), whereas to watch in such a way that you were carried along or 'wrapped up' in the narrative was less selfish, more generous and respectful to the film: 'less ego, less based on me reconstructing the narrative' (117). He chuckled after issuing what he felt to be a pretentious statement, but the idea of a generous and respectful viewing register being less tied to ego continued to surface throughout his interview, and indeed offered a helpful way to understand some of the comments made on this subject by other interviewees. There is a sense, explicit in Andy's comments, but evidently implicit in the other remarks quoted above, that the adoption of an uninterrupted and complete mode of viewing is a practical expression of a profound respect for and pleasure in the compulsion of the film narrative: to experience this pleasure and to express this respect in its most heightened form, the viewers set aside the more 'ego'-based activities of text manipulation, and

surrender themselves to the pleasures afforded by the skills of the director. According to the testimonies of these cinephiliac viewers, the effects of such surrender are powerful, and continue to exert their force during repeat viewings. For, contrary to the rather alarmist arguments put forward by Tashiro about the injurious effects of videotape upon the power of narrative movies,¹⁵ all the interviewees stressed their desire to follow through a narrative as a powerful motivation for uninterrupted viewings at both initial and subsequent screenings of their favoured tapes. For example, Sandra, a thirty-eight-year-old social worker, described how 'I like to see a film through – because I get really caught up in them' (326); similarly Lucy, a forty-eight-year-old local government officer, explained how when watching one of her favourite movies: 'Sometimes I think I'll just watch a bit of it [*Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, US 1990)]. And I just get hooked, and that was it – and it's wonderful' (198). Leonard told how 'I get completely wrapped up in it [*The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, US, 1965)] – you know just how tense it gets just towards the end – well, even though I know what's going to happen, I'm hooked' (233). Perhaps the most striking example of the experience of being 'hooked' by a narrative of a frequently re-viewed movie, is Simon's account of his relationship with *Aliens* (James Cameron, US, 1986):

[*Aliens* is] the kind of movie that I think, oh well I'll watch a bit of it, and then I put it on and I've got to watch the whole thing all the way through. Yeah, I've got to watch it all, I can't stop. And when it was on TV recently, I flipped over the channel, and I thought 'Oh, *Aliens* is on, well I'll watch ten minutes and then go to bed – no, I sat up and watched it until the very end' (136).

Narrative compulsion was also cited by a number of respondents as motivating them to persist with films that they suspected were not really worthy of their attention: Matt explained that even in such cases, surrender to narrative compulsion was justified: 'sometimes I've been watching a film and I think this isn't very good, and then all of a sudden it gets good at the end or something' (455). Luke also reflected upon this phenomenon, and his conclusions were characteristic of comments made by the other dedicated film lovers who comprised my sample:

even with some films if I was totally not interested I still wouldn't go [off] – because there's still some interest in what might happen – I'd still sit and see it through – however dire it was . . . just because there might be . . . one line in it – and I might think that's a really good line – it might be dire TRASH but there was one line that was really good. . . . I don't think I've ever stopped watching a video that was bad (85).

Concentration and domestic film viewing: environmental alterations

John Ellis places the attentive cinematic gaze inside the cinema, and links it very directly to the technological practicalities of cinematic projection, which demands a screen of a certain size: 'The cinematic image is large and high definition, and it is watched in conditions of relatively intense and sustained attention'.¹⁶ It is important to note that although the two parts (nature of image; nature of audience) of Ellis's succinct description are linked only by 'and', the basis of his, and of many other arguments about the attentive nature of the cinematic spectator, rest upon an assumed dependency between the size of the image, the physical arrangement of the cinema space and the level of attention of the spectator. The attentive gaze is, according to Ellis's definition, necessarily cinematic. As a widely referenced interpreter of the dominant tradition of British film studies, Ellis's individual observations can be read as indicative of those prevailing ideas about cinema spectatorship which have typically characterized many film academics' responses to video viewing. In his presentation of the 'cinematic viewer = attentive viewer' conflation, Ellis reinforces a sense of inter-dependency which, if it remains unquestioned, precludes the possibility for attentive viewing outside the cinema. The testimonies of the informants in my study, however, indicate very clearly that it is quite possible to watch videotaped movies on television with those high degrees of intense attentiveness more usually often connected with the desire to watch uninterrupted.

Many interviewees drew comparisons between the way they watched films in the cinema and the way they watched them on video and offered detailed descriptions of the ways in which they altered their viewing environment, not simply to approximate the appearance of a cinema, but to recreate the optimal conditions for focused attention which that viewing environment can offer.¹⁷ All of the interviewees made some efforts to physically encourage concentration on a film, and to limit possible interruptions to that viewing. The reported environmental alterations typically involved dimming lights and preparing comfortable seating and convenient refreshments in such a way as to facilitate uninterrupted viewings. Phone calls were sometimes left to a machine to pick up, and the general aim of the alterations to the space of domestic reception was to encourage a more reverential, more cinematic space and atmosphere for viewing. These physical alterations to the everyday configurations of the viewing environment helped to create a sense of the movie viewing sessions as a special occasion, and this sense of 'specialness' corresponds to and facilitates the devotional viewing of movies as a more 'sacred' and attentive act than that of watching everyday television. The attention to such details as the placing of seats, curtains and mugs which viewers described indicates a close

16 Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, p. 89.

17 For a more detailed account of the specifics of two particular collections and viewing environments, see Uma Dinsmore, 'Chaos, order and plastic boxes', in Christine Geraghty and David Lusted (eds), *The Television Studies Book* (London: Arnold, 1998), pp. 315–26.

18 Marie Gillespie, *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 88–9.

19 Dobrow, 'The rerun ritual'. See also Leoncio Barrios, 'Television, telenovelas and family life in Venezuela', in James Lull (ed.), *World Families Watch Television* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988), p. 70.

20 Docherty et al., *The Last Picture Show?*, p. 71.

21 Elizabeth Parks Hahn, 'The communication of Tongan tradition: mass media and culture in the kingdom of Tonga' (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, PhD thesis, 1992). Hahn points out that in Tonga, where the introduction of VCR preceded that of broadcast television, video is regarded and experienced as more closely related to cinema than to television.

link to the type of devotional viewing which Gillespie observed in the Dhani household, where, not only are 'god films' watched uninterrupted, but, 'the devotional viewing of religious films involves taboos, prohibitions and rituals, similar to those surrounding sacred places and objects'.¹⁸ Dobrow has also indicated the possibility of regarding certain VCR uses as quasi-devotional by choosing to characterize repeat viewings as 'rituals'.¹⁹

Luke's simple account of environmental alteration prior to movie viewing is typical of the efforts which all interviewees reported, particularly in relation to the viewings of a favourite or classic movie: 'for watching a film like that I'll sort of sit – and maybe have a little light on in the corner – I don't like the main lights on, and I'll make sure I've got enough drink and stuff to hand so I don't have to get up' (131). The desire for an appropriately reverent atmosphere and environment is confined to the viewing of *films* on the television screen. In contrast, the comments which some viewers made about television, particularly in the post-interview written testimonials which asked about the relation between television and film viewing, revealed how keenly these cinephiles distinguished between how they watched television and how they watched movies. Leonard, for example, outlined a strictly enforced set of 'house rules' which prohibited the watching of certain kinds of programme, and limited the viewing of television at all in the presence of guests, but set up videotape viewing as a special exemption from these regulations.

In both their written and spoken comments the cinephiles whom I interviewed made extremely clear distinctions between watching films on the television screen, and watching television programmes. Their high level of involvement with and commitment to film texts, and their attempts to minimize interruptions and recreate the optimum conditions for focused viewing that the ideal cinema environment affords, run directly counter to the findings of Docherty, Morrison and Tracy's survey of general cinema and VCR viewing habits. Docherty et al. conclude that video is more closely linked to television than to cinema, and that it is, in fact, simply 'a different type of television'.²⁰ The responses of the cinephiles clearly demonstrate the possibility that some viewers may, on the contrary experience VCR as 'son of cinema'.²¹

Rethinking viewer control and attention

Like many of the writers to whom I referred at the beginning of this paper, I had initially conceived of viewer control in the case of videotape as being about the physical manipulation of the tape/text through the use of fast-forward, rewind and pause controls. In the light of the comments made by interviewees, and evidenced by

questionnaire respondents, my initial conception has shifted to accommodate the possibility that, for these cinephiles, there exists another kind of viewer control that is rooted in an almost authorial omniscience acquired through repeated and uninterrupted viewings.

Although the viewer may choose not to exercise her control over the movie by re-arranging its narrative, altering its speed, or watching selectively, the act of watching the movie over and over again effectively provides the viewer with such detailed knowledge of the plot, characters, dialogue, editing, music and cinematography of the film that she begins to regard the film as 'her own' in so far as her intimate understanding of how the film works places her in a quasi-authorial position of omniscience, a powerful position of identification with the director. The authority over the text which this position affords is based on profound intimacy with the workings of the text, and as such it does not need to be demonstrated by pausing, fast-forwarding or rewinding the tape. These methods of viewer control operate at a grosser, more superficial level: they offer only the power of control over physical and temporal aspects of the film, and do not afford the viewer the kind of power over the text that can be achieved by acquiring intimate knowledge of its detailed structure, its nuances of tone and pace, and its flaws. This kind of intimate knowledge can be possessed only by the devoted observer, who can use it to develop a level of highly informed anticipatory understanding of how a film functions. Such a degree of understanding is accessible neither to first-time viewers, nor to those viewers whose wielding of the fast-forward, freeze or rewind buttons appears to give them total control over the progress of the film, because they do not possess the depth of familiarity with the text that could make this superficial manipulative power more textually significant. To speak in the terms used by some of my interviewees, such zipping and zapping encourages ignorant or disrespectful viewing, a demonstration of flippant whimsy rather than the exercise of informed viewer control. The most powerful and deeply rooted form of viewer control rests in the head of the viewer, and not in their hands.

At the start of this paper, I observed that the small number and the particularity of the informants to whose responses I refer precludes the drawing of broad or generalizable conclusions. Such specificity however does provide a valuable perspective upon the wider picture of video viewing. The experiences of those enthusiasts whose level of commitment to movies is of an unusually intense degree provides a clear vantage point from which to survey the more typical varieties of home cinema experience. Situated perhaps at the extreme margins of contemporary movie viewing experiences, the perspective offered by the specific nature of these cinephiles' experiences with videotape provides a helpful indication of the remarkable range of the video viewing, home cinema experience. The

devotion to film which many of the informants possessed may indeed make them 'special' cases, and their video viewing practices may well be untypical. Far more extensive qualitative and quantitative research would need to be undertaken in order to ascertain if there is indeed a general pattern of more fragmented video viewing practices, but even if such research were extant, the discovery of the particularly devoted and reverently uninterrupted and repeated viewings regularly undertaken by this small group of British cinephiles does indicate that the experience of attentive spectatorship is clearly not exclusively confined to the cinema.

The testimonies and stories which I received and heard provide vivid and convincing evidence that domestic viewing of feature films on videotape has the capacity, at least for those people who have a passionate love of film, to be an intensely focused activity. This attentive focus, facilitated and developed by physically 'cinematizing' the domestic viewing environment and repeatedly viewing favoured texts, enables these cinephile viewers consciously to acquire and retain a high degree of detailed knowledge about the films they love. The degree of extreme engagement reported by these informants, both during initial and repeat viewings, demonstrates both that the perceived circumstantial distractions of the domestic viewing environment are not necessarily a barrier to intensely attentive spectatorship, and also that the domestication of the cinematic text through repeat video viewings may facilitate a level of engagement with, love for, and knowledge about movies that exceeds or extends that which it is possible to achieve during cinematic screenings.

reports

Society for Cinema Studies Conference, University of Chicago, 9–12 March 2000

At this year's Society for Cinema Studies conference, Victoria E. Johnson noted (referring to Emma Thompson's appearance on *Ellen*) that the American Midwest is a place of political and geographical 'middleness' in the American imaginary map – in short, 'uncool'. (More on this paper later.) Hardly *Fargo* but still the Midwest, the brash and beautiful city of Chicago disproved the rule, making a wonderful setting for this year's conference. Panels and workshops faced stiff competition from architectural tours and the Art Institute just down Michigan Avenue. Any account of a conference on the scale of the Society for Cinema Studies is, of necessity, anecdotal. The conference offers a diffuse experience with no less than eleven parallel panels and workshops, caucus meetings, and a full roster of screenings. (For instance, Saturday night entertainment included a splendid screening of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* with live accompaniment.) As the core disciplinary event for US Film Studies, the conference was broad in scope, and generally well organized – the resilience of SCS lies in a diversity of content and in its role as a disciplinary meeting place.

As a first-time participant, I found that this diversity and scale meant a lack of thematic centre; clearly much of the important business was happening in conversations over meals, in the extensive publisher's display, and in a series of excellent workshops, to which I will return below. The single plenary session was entitled 'The State of the Profession'. This session was fascinating not so much for offering a platform for discussion – there was none, as the session was overcrowded and ran over time – but as a snapshot of productive tensions within US Film Studies. Diverse

presentations raised a number of important political, technological and disciplinary concerns that might be grouped loosely around the questions of disciplinary boundaries and belonging. Jennifer Holt raised the theme of technological convergence and its impact on the field of Film Studies. Holt suggested that media convergence prompts the field to broaden its object of study to encompass the full range of moving images (film, television, video, digital technologies); these media share significant common elements (such as narrative form) as well as differences in delivery and reception. Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, in contrast, stressed the need for disciplinary boundaries. In an institutional context where Film Studies is commonly marginalized within larger departments (such as English) she suggested a return to the specificity of film as an object – a move foregrounding core expertise around the materiality of film, notably film history.

Catherine Benamou, another plenary speaker, highlighted international disparities in the study of the media. Calling for a renewed attention to the structures of state and transnational media production and transmission, she suggested the need for more equitable and open scholarly exchange between First World scholars and those working in other contexts. Benamou's intervention raised questions about the scholarly and critical scope and focus of SCS. While many international scholars were present at the conference, this plenary was comprised entirely of speakers from US universities. I was left wondering about the constituency of SCS, a question far exceeding the scope of this review. However, the next two speakers raised points highlighting different local, regional, national and international creative and critical frames for thinking about constituency and responsibility. Mark Reid, for instance, raised the ghost of Gramsci's 'public intellectual', noting how academic reliance on public money foregrounds the question of public

responsibility. He also critiqued the 'non-status' of black intellectuals in the field, and noted how the hegemony of classical film theory excludes other forms of knowledge such as the poetic, gestural and musical aspects of African diasporic culture. Finally, Patricia Zimmerman delivered a passionate manifesto critiquing increasingly individualist tendencies in the field, and the marking off of disciplinary territory. Zimmerman reminded the conference that cinema can (and should!) 'put you in conversation with the world' – how it inspires 'possession by ideas' and 'speaking in tongues'. In this light, she called for a more open, fluid and collective approach to Film Studies guided by dialogue with artists and the broader community.

Some of these debates extended into a series of workshops running throughout the conference. Distinct from the formal papers, one of the conference's great strengths was a series of excellent workshops offering useful platforms for dialogue about teaching, curriculum, institutional politics and research strategies. Popular practical sessions on the job market and publishing your first book offered useful tips for young scholars and graduate students. Other workshop topics included: teaching in conservative environments, doing archival research, the future of film theory, film audiences, and teaching race and ethnicity on television. One particularly dynamic session explored 'Film Studies in an Age of Media Convergence'. Picking up on themes raised in the plenary, this session considered the disciplinary and pedagogical implications of media convergence. Henry Jenkins spoke persuasively about the need for public intellectuals to intervene in the teaching of, and debates around, new media. Jenkins, as well as Lisa Cartright, outlined the strategic process of developing new programmes around digital technologies at MIT and the University of Rochester, respectively. A productive and wide-ranging discussion followed between panellists and audience

about inter/disciplinarity in Film and Media Studies. At issue, once again, seemed to be the appropriate 'object' of the discipline. Representing one important conference theme, these panellists insisted that a convergence context challenges Film Studies to include not only 'film' proper, but also television, video, the internet and digital media. An interesting crosscultural debate arose when two British scholars insistently raised the question of uneven access to technology. This heated exchange highlighted the specificity of a highly developed US technological context. Nonetheless, the panellists raised useful and important themes related to integrating new media into the curriculum – issues such as the intertwining of practice and theory and the relationship between new media education and the industry.

Panel themes were highly diverse. Film history and digital media were core concerns and the subject of several key panels, including a strong panel, 'Women and American Film Culture', with papers by Shelley Stamp, Lee Grieveson, Eric Smoodin and Haidee Wasson. Another persistent keyword was 'affect'. In a panel on this topic, Linda Williams discussed a generalizable 'melodramatic mode' in US cinema with reference to *The Hurricane* (Norman Jewison, 1999) and *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont, 1999). Williams argued that the melodramatic address to 'moral legibility' precedes or overrides 'rational' debates about race in US culture. Copanellists Jennifer Barker and Jim Berkley raised 'affective' theoretical frames in Cinema Studies, notably phenomenology. Elena del Rio offered a dense but fascinating treatment of performance, kinetic experience and gesture with reference to Fassbinder. These theoretical developments and applications offer fresh vocabularies in drawing out formerly unaddressed aspects of film aesthetics and spectatorship. Williams's contention that 'affect' or the 'melodramatic mode' is core to a US cultural sensibility resonated with

Christopher Anderson's paper on the 'weeping detective' and the 'melodramatic' aspects of recent US crime drama. In this vein, both the 'Affect' panel, and the panel on 'Noir, Law and Order' displayed creative and critical uses of genre. The latter panel explored the generic terrain of US noir by Anderson, Christina B. Hanhardt's paper on participatory crime television in *America's Most Wanted* and Margaret DeRosia's thoughtful paper on race, gender and sexuality in *One False Move* (Carl Franklin, 1991).

On a different note, two fascinating papers on landscape worked well together in a panel entitled 'Imagining the Citizen, Imagining the Other'. Caroline Butler Palmer's paper examined how until recently the Inuit have been excluded from representations of the Canadian Arctic. With reference to *Map of the Human Heart* (Vincent Ward, 1992), she discussed how the Inuit have recently become, problematically, more 'visible' in Canadian discourses of nation. In an examination of another remote landscape, Jennifer Peterson examined the significance of the Australian Outback in *Walkabout* (Nicolas Roeg, 1970). Although the film may be read as exploiting the Aboriginal boy and the natural landscape, Peterson suggested another reading – 'nature' is filmed in its own right, not merely as a function of narrative (a stylistic and thematic turn reminiscent, perhaps, of Terence Malick).

One final notable panel was 'The Girl's Room'. Interestingly, although there were many lesbians and gay men present, this was the conference's only designated 'queer' panel. Whatever the significance of this scheduling, this intelligent and entertaining session took lesbian and queer screen theory beyond familiar frames of visibility and positive images. Louise Wahlenberg offered a witty paper on paradoxical lesbian craze in Sweden in the wake of Lucas Moodysson's *Show Me Love* (1998). Patricia White's paper examined 'not-quite-coming-out' narratives in works by Chantal Akerman, Su Friedrich and

Sadie Benning as evidence of 'lesbian minor cinema'. In the wake of the recent commodification of 'lesbian chic', White argued that the liminal, amorphous sexuality explored in these works defies the 'major' conventions of recent lesbian independent cinema such as *The Incredibly True Adventures of 2 Girls in Love* (Maria Maggenti, 1995), or even *Show Me Love*. And to return to *Ellen* and the Midwest, where this report began, Victoria E. Johnson examined the significance of 'Middle America' in discourses of taste circulating around the 'coming out' episode of *Ellen*. She argued that public discourses around the *Roseanne* 'lesbian episode' and *Ellen* equate lesbianism with hip, urban East and West Coast settings, even as explicit sexuality is evacuated from the television screen. In the process, lesbianism becomes a marker of a 'cool' 'taste culture' which becomes meaningful only in relation to an imagined 'uncool' Middle America – the fantasy 'square' audience which supposedly opposes it.

Julianne Pidduck

The 22nd Créteil Women's Film Festival, 24 March-2 April 2000

As the website www.womenfilmnet.org shows, festivals celebrating women and cinema are on the increase, though few if any achieve the scope and enduring appeal of Créteil, which this year screened 130 films in nine days, 115 of which were made by women directors. Inevitably when you spend over a week watching on average five films a day, titles, names and narratives soon escape you, but it is the images which persist. So it is that we will remember the twenty-second Créteil festival for its images of tragi-femmes past (Antigone, Electra as played by Irène Papas, recipient of the *auto-portrait* given by a different actress every year) and of women

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still struggling against family, country or ideology in the present. In the blur of nine days in a darkened room, Papas's women seemed to be striking a blow for twentieth-century feminism, while our modern heroines achieved classical tragic status.

The majority of the films shown at Créteil are in competition (fiction, documentary and shorts sections are judged first by a jury and then by the public) though there are also regular historical/critical sections. This year these were the *auto-portrait* mentioned above, a geographically-themed section on Mediterranean women directors, a section on *chef-opératrices* (camerawomen), films about childhood, and a panorama of recent films by women directors. Events included a continuation of the *leçons du cinéma*, some eight 'forums' on a variety of subjects and a couple of *avant-premiers*, including *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Pierce, USA 1999) which was astutely moved at the last minute so that it could be shown post-Oscars. Perhaps the most pleasing development this year was the creation, at long last, of an archive, 'Iris', of video copies of films past and present shown at the festival, available for viewing by the public (at a small charge) in the Maison des Arts, the festival venue.

The section on Mediterranean women filmmakers featured fifty-two films by directors from Egypt, Spain, France, Corsica, Greece, Israel, Italy, Lebanon, Portugal, Tunisia, Morocco and Turkey. Inevitably one is only able to see a small proportion of such a massive section, but it was pleasing to see debut features from women who had previously presented shorts at the festival, such as *In Principio Erano le Mutande/In the Beginning there was Underwear* (Anna Négri, Italy, 1999).

The Mediterranean, and Spain in particular, featured well in the shorts competition, with the public prize for best foreign short and jury prize for best European short going respectively to Spanish films *Lalia* (Silvia Munt, 1999) – about a young girl in exile in

Algeria who shares her thoughts with us – and *El beso de la tierra* (Lucinda Torre, 1999) – about a young man who returns to his home town to visit the mother of his now deceased best friend – while the Canal plus jury prize went to *El Infanticida* (Pilar Ruiz Guttierrez, 1999), as disturbing a tale as its title suggests. The variety of subjects and approaches in the shorts competition was also evident in the prizes for the jury's best francophone short and the public's best French short, both won by *Angoisse* (Blanca Li, 1999) in which the filmmaker plays the lead character, who suffers a nightmare about flying played out through comic choreography.

In the fiction competition Jamie Babbit's racy high-camp comedy *But I'm A Cheerleader* (US, 1999) won both the public prize and that awarded by a jury of schoolchildren (the Graine de Cinéphage). In this parody of coming-out stories, heroine Megan (Natasha Lyon) starts out as a confused small-town Christian cheerleader who finds the heaving bosoms of her team mates more fascinating than the tongue-heavy kisses of her steady boyfriend. Her parents and friends, having seen dangerous and irrefutable signs of lesbianism (tofu and vegetarianism) call in 'True Directions', a local homosexual rehabilitation camp.

Mike (played by Ru Paul *sans* drag) appears with a 'straight is great' T-shirt, and the plot and imagery move swiftly through a whole host of American institutions: summer camps, before-and-after videos, 'five-step' therapy, encounter groups and the condemnation of 'liberal arts brainwashing'. The various forms of 'therapy' offered at True Directions include simulated sex sessions, aversion therapy where electric shocks are administered as punishment for inappropriate thoughts, and the sharing of 'trauma stories', which are supposedly the cause of the unnatural desires. These therapies are not merely outrageously funny narrative devices, but recall moments of gay history

and its encounters with sexology. Finally Megan is able, with the help of the terrorist underground Homo Railroad, to find her true identity, rescue her girl from the camp graduation ceremony, and ride off with her and her cheerleader pom-poms. The dreamy, lush sets recall Babbit's last short film, *Sleeping Beauty* (USA, 1998), though the film is saved from too much sugar and stereotyping through its glimpses of anguish and oppression.

Whilst images of ancient western European history were evoked through the Papas section, and the section on the Mediterranean, an altogether different landscape and culture were the subject of *Seitsemän Laulua Tundralta/Seven Songs of the Tundra* (Anastasia Lapsui and Markku Lehmuskallio, Finland, 1999), which won the Jury fiction prize. This was a highly original film which refused to engage in western genres or forms, and found its own language, drawing the spectator in through its enigmatic beauty. The film is based on the experiences and local legends of the Nenets of North Russia, a group of hunters in ice and tundra. It tells their story, the 'history of who I am' through non-actors enacting parts of their personal or family history, and through the device of 'songs' delivered to camera, which spawn short narrative events. A static camera records events with distance, but this is a distance of framing rather than alienation. Black and white stock emphasizes the timeless quality of the events, which merge pre-Communist tribalism with the advent of five-year plans, war and deaths.

Change and movement do not seem to emerge out of the onscreen action, but are driven by forces outside the actors' circle (the State) or by a near-mythical transformation. Thus, a young woman is married off to a rich suitor, and leaves with his sleighs once she has said her good-byes to her mother-mistress, her brothers and the poor workers, one of whom she loves. In the ice, she runs off from her new husband, and back to the

camp. But she has transformed: she is no longer daughter, sister and lover, but slave, without position. A similar transformation occurs when a girl comes back from the Communist school to her erstwhile friend, who has hidden from the teachers and inspectors. The old friend is someone else now, with a new name, a new language and a new dress. Like other neorealist experiments, *Seven Songs* raises interesting questions about communal narrative, myth and storytelling, through the sensuous appeal of image and music. The film is framed by a floating image of an old tree, shadows on snow, and the traces of people superimposed on the white surface: time is passing, but stories remain.

In the documentary competitions the prizes went to a reappraisal of those radical feminists who were at the heart of the women's liberation movement in France and francophone Switzerland, *Debout! Une histoire du mouvement de libération des femmes 1970–80* (Carole Roussopoulos, France /Switzerland, 1999) (public prize) and a film which seemed to answer the former's call 'to a younger generation': *Shadow Boxers* (Katya Bankowsky, USA, 1999) (jury prize). The latter beautifully constructed documentary focuses on female boxing, yet avoids the obvious discourse of gender difference which such a subject might have raised in the period evoked in *Debout!* Instead the film focuses on the personal goals and achievements of its subject, world champion Lucia Rijker. The diverse visual experiences successfully draw the spectator into the embodied state of calm and speed, lightness and power – so different from the worlds depicted in films such as *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980) or *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999). Women's boxing emerges here as an art, a zen experience of focus and a celebration of skill, with Rijker retaining a calm clarity throughout.

The *chefs opératrices* section, featuring Nurith Aviv, Caroline Champetier, Agnès Godard, Dominique Le Rigoleur, as well as the lesser-known Tessa Racine and Claire

Childeric, opened up a relatively unexplored critical area. This was achieved through screenings – with each woman choosing one or two of the films they had worked on, a ‘cinema lesson’ by Nurith Aviv and a ‘debate’ with all five.

The wealth of filmmaking represented at this debate was awe-inspiring – from Aviv’s work with Agnès Varda (*Documenteur France* [1981], *Jane B par Agnès V* [1987]) and Amos Gitai (including *Berlin-Jerusalem* [1989]) Edna Politi and Mira Nair; Caroline Champetier with Chantal Akerman (*Toute une nuit* [1982]) Nicole Garcia, Laetitia Masson and Jacques Doillon; Agnès Godard’s extended work with Claire Denis (from *Chocolat* [1988] onwards) and Dominique Le Rigoleur with Margeurite Duras.

Despite experience which stretched back to the late 1970s, all the women were relatively modest about their roles. For Aviv, the first woman in such a role, and Le Rigoleur, it was very difficult to get taken on as an assistant cameraperson and Le Rigoleur suggested that it was mainly those who were themselves marginal (in her words, émigrés, homosexuals or Communists) who were

willing to take them on. All cited Nestor Almendros and Henri Alekan as inspirational, and most had worked with one or the other.

On the expressive side of their role less was said; most frequently it seemed they did what the director wanted, or were the ones being realistic about how certain effects could or could not be achieved. When asked whether they thought their gender gave them a certain common approach no one was forthcoming. In a different context, though, Caroline Champetier has suggested that there is a quality of reception which has to do with being a woman, something less exterior, and she suggests that she often feels a great sensitivity in films made by women.

It may seem surprising that at a festival of films by women (and one that has been in existence for twenty-two years) the question of the difference gender makes is received in dumb silence, but such is the paradox of Créteil. It is perhaps interesting to note that the festival itself recently won a prize, the *Olympe d’or* for its contribution to ‘equality between the sexes’.

Cathy Fowler and Petra Küppers

reviews

review:

Russell Lack, *Twenty Four Frames Under: a Buried History of Film Music*. London: Quartet Books, 1997, 368 pp.

Martin Miller Marks, *Music and the Silent Film: Contexts and Case Studies, 1895–1924*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 303 pp.

Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, 278 pp.

Jeff Smith, *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, 288 pp.

John Mundy, *Popular Music on Screen. From Hollywood Musical to Music Video*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999, 272 pp.

Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (eds), *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*. Exeter: Intellect Books, 2000, 187 pp.

SIMON FRITH

At the start of his richly detailed study of silent film scores, Martin Miller Marks wonders why, after more than eight decades of an abundant variety of music-making, 'the facts of film music are not widely understood' (p. 3). In the introduction to his fascinating account of the postwar symbiosis between the US film and music industries, Jeff Smith notes that 'despite popular music's economic importance for Hollywood, the development of title songs and soundtrack albums as economic and cultural forms has generally been ignored in film music criticism' (p. 3). In the conclusion to his sweeping survey of the history of film music, Russell Lack suggests that 'music, and film music in particular, could be better understood

by both writers and musicians and therefore more creatively explored if more was understood about the effects of its sound within a film' (p. 347).

For all these writers the 'problem' of film music reflects the limitation of the academic disciplines of Film and Music Studies, which serve to bracket off film music from film analysis, on the one hand, and musical analysis, on the other. But the underlying issue is the academic treatment of music generally. Lack regrets the ways in which music theory is isolated from music history such that, in Claire Detels's words, 'music receives little or no discussion in general humanities and social science courses and curricula which otherwise benefit from interdisciplinary integration. The same omission occurs in cultural criticism; that is, music is omitted from discussion in cases where it is obviously relevant, such as film reviews, or mentioned only superficially' (pp. 347-8). Smith notes the view, 'held by traditional musicologists and film music scholars alike' that 'popular music has no intrinsic aesthetic value and is only interesting as a sociological phenomenon' (p. 4). Marks agrees that 'textbooks of music history provide examples of neglect: though they occasionally mention a respected composer's venture into film music, this peculiar hybrid idiom is mostly ignored' (pp. 4-5).

In historical terms, the academic neglect of film music is incontrovertible, and I have no doubt that the peculiar musicological obsession with music 'in itself' is one reason for such neglect (though I would also refer to Film Studies' equally peculiar obsession with the visual aspects of an audiovisual medium) but there is beginning to be something self-defeating about the way in which film music scholars feel the need to draw attention to their subject's neglect. What was once just a statement of fact has become an analytic trope in itself, giving the study of film music its own privileged site of self-pity, and what is most striking about these books on film and music, randomly selected as those that have been sent to *Screen* in the last three years, is how many of them do isolate film music as a field of study, how little the authors seem to be engaged with each other.

It is, perhaps, not surprising that the most stimulating book here is the one least concerned with 'film music'. Nicholas Cook's *Analysing Musical Multimedia* explores much more generally the ways in which music can work with other media—words, moving pictures, performance, dance – to make meaning. His case studies include television commercials for Citroën and Volvo cars and Walkers crisps, as well as a Madonna video, the 'Rite of Spring' as realized in Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940), and Godard's use of music from Lully's opera, *Armide*, in the film *Aria* (1987). In disciplinary terms, Cook is the straight musicologist here; he is also the author least interested in treating film music as something special. In tracing the history of arguments about multimedia

synaesthesia ('the extensively documented tendency for an input in one sensory mode to excite an involuntary response in another' [p. 25]) and metaphor (as developed by Eisenstein, for example), Cook challenges 'the terminological impoverishment epitomized by film criticism's traditional categorization of all music-picture relationships as either parallel or contrapuntal, and [the] unconscious (and certainly uncritical) assumption that such relationships are to be understood in terms of hegemony or hierarchy rather than interaction' (p. 107). *Analysing Musical Multimedia* should be the starting point for all future writing on film music; it provides the comprehensive analytic, historical and musicological framework for which film music scholars have long called. Unfortunately it does not announce itself as a work of film music scholarship, and I suspect that it will itself be neglected.

Martin Miller Marks's *Music and the Silent Film* is equally important but for a narrower reason: Marks provides the definitive account of the material problem of studying film music. The difficulty facing the film music historian is not just that 'scripts, cue sheets, scores and recordings are scattered in private collections, libraries and film studios, often uncatalogued', but also that none of these are the film sound itself. Scores, for instance, 'only tell us about a film's music, without indications of simultaneous dialogue and sound effects', while 'most commercial recordings are as inaccurate in their own way as script publications'. The methodological problem, as Marks notes, is that 'as of yet no satisfactory method of transcribing a whole soundtrack has been found' (pp. 6–7), and Marks's case studies (including Saint-Saëns' score for *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise* [1908]; the US films, *An Arabian Tragedy* [1912] and *The Birth of a Nation* [1915]; Eric Satie's *Entr'acte* [1924]) are therefore more interesting for his attempts to solve this methodological problem – how to reconstruct and describe the particular music for particular films – than as musical interpretations.

If Marks tends to approach film music from the perspective of its composer, Jeff Smith is concerned with film music as an industrial product, an approach which certainly has been neglected in Film Studies, and *The Sounds of Commerce* is an impressively researched and illuminating account of the use and development of 'the pop score' in films since the 1960s. Smith's case studies focus on the work of three composers – Henry Mancini's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), John Barry's *Goldfinger* (1964) and Ennio Morricone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966) – but his book is most valuable in its general account of the evolving relationship between the film and music industries, and in its detailed analysis of film music marketing and film music as marketing. Smith's chapters on the compilation score (focused on *American Graffiti* [1973]) and the rise of the rock soundtrack (the film promoting the record as much as the

record promoting the film) are not simply informative but provide an alternative analytic voice to the familiar academic tale of the 'decline' of Hollywood music.

The other books here are less consistent in their achievements. Russell Lack's *Twenty Four Frames Under* is an idiosyncratic non-academic film music history. It is based on familiar secondary sources (and it is not completely reliable: I was surprised to find myself named as co-author of one of Lawrence Grossberg's books), but it is readable, covers a great range of issues and is refreshingly non Hollywood-centric. There is no other book that covers so much ground so enthusiastically and it is certainly the film music book to put on introductory film course reading lists. *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond* is a collection of essays which attempts to move the discussion of musicals beyond genre studies. The editors define the musical as 'any film in which music is an integral part of the narrative' and bring together a variety of analytic approaches (musicology, sociology, history, 'ideology criticism', national cinema studies, psychoanalysis). The result is certainly eclectic: the various contributors closely read *The Band Wagon* (1953), *The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle* (1979) and *Beach Blanket Bingo* (1965); they examine musicals in 1950s Germany and 1960s Greece and trace the use of hip hop in recent French films and folklore in less recent Spanish ones; they celebrate stars and directors as diverse as Groucho Marx, Audrey Hepburn, Barbra Streisand, Chantal Akerman and Derek Jarman; they deal with issues of race and power and sexuality. I'm not convinced, though (despite Bill Marshall's and Robynn Stilwell's valiant introductory efforts), that the result is coherent enough to 'initiate a new critical debate', as the blurb claims. Each individual essay seems too short to do justice to its material; there is no information as to how this collection came about nor about the contributors. The underlying theme seems to be utopianism (Richard Dyer is most authors' inspiration) but even this term is used in too many ways to be helpful. There's enough spirit here to make you want to see a lot of films, familiar and unfamiliar; I am not sure, though, that there is enough analytic originality to change the way you see them.

Finally, the anomalous title here: John Mundy is not directly interested in film music. His concern (from the perspective of Cultural Studies) is how popular music is represented on screen and how such representations then feed into the popular musical performance and its meanings. Mundy's argument is that 'popular music on the screen represents a set of 'specific practices', carrying with them implicit ideological positions which we may – or may not – reject' (p. 5), and his aim is to persuade us that there is a continuity in these specific practices from the founding of the cinema and record industries at the start of the twentieth century through to contemporary video clips on MTV. This project is ambitious enough

to be interesting, and Mundy's chapters on the less familiar aspects of the story (British film musicals, for instance) are valuable, but I was never quite persuaded by the underlying argument. Mundy's position is that film and television 'are structurally and ideologically bound up with the popular music industry and those commercial enterprises through which we receive, interpret, delight in or reject our music' (p. 214). But while few people would disagree that 'the Hollywood musical, films featuring rock'n'roll and pop artists, pop shows on television and contemporary Hollywood films using pop soundtracks have exercised powerful mediating influences over the social circulation, consumption and meaning of popular music' (p. 245), it is not nearly so clear that what is involved here is some kind of corruption of unmediated youth musical cultures nor that 'entertainment' is an essentially negative concept. What would Mundy make of Smith's book, I wonder. What would Smith make of Mundy's? How would either change their close readings in the light of Cook's suggestions? Until we can answer these questions – until film music studies develops like other disciplines as an on-going conversation, the field will continue to be dominated by the problem of misunderstanding.

review:

Michael T. Martin (ed.), *New Latin American Cinema: Volume One – Theory, Practices and Transcontinental Articulations*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1997, 332 pp.; *New Latin American Cinema: Volume Two – Studies of National Cinemas*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1997, 540 pp.

Robert Stam, *Tropical Multiculturalism: a Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997, 409 pp.

Donald F. Stevens (ed.), *Based on a True Story: Latin American History at the Movies*. Wilmington, Delaware: SR Books, 1997, 243 pp.

Ismail Xavier, *Allegories of Underdevelopment: Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 285 pp.

CATHERINE GRANT

Latin American Film Studies appears to be a thriving area for English-language academic publishing, at least given the evidence of this recent crop of five books, all of which appeared in the same year as *Screen*'s own special issue on Latin American cinema:¹ one two-volume anthology of key theoretical and historical readings; one collection of mostly new essays; and two highly original monographs, one of these revised from its earlier Brazilian edition.² Despite their different aims and scope, and very varied approaches, these books could all be said to be linked, like most (if not quite all) anglophone contributions to this subject, by a strong interest in considering film historically. It is this particular connection which will provide a framework for this review.

¹ *Screen*, vol. 38, no. 4 (1997).

² Ismail Xavier, *Allegorias do subdesenvolvimento: Cinema Novo, Tropicalismo, Cinema Marginal* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1993); the US edition is also based on Xavier's 1982 New York University PhD dissertation 'Allegories of underdevelopment: from the aesthetics of hunger to the aesthetics of garbage'.

3 For example, many are taken from the following: Michael Chanan (ed.), *Twenty-Five Years of New Latin American Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1983), as well as his well-known books on Chilean and Cuban cinema; John King, *Magical Reels: a History of Cinema in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1990), very shortly to appear in a revised edition; John King, Ana M. López and Manuel Alvarado (eds), *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas* (London: British Film Institute, 1993); Altaf Gauhar (ed.), *Third World Affairs 1985 and Third World Affairs 1988* (London: Third World Foundation, 1985 and 1988); Jim Pines and Paul Willemsen (eds), *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1989); Tim Barnard (ed.), *Argentine Cinema* (Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986); *Iris*, no. 13 (1991); *Screen*, vol. 26, nos 3–4 (1985); and several special issues of *Framework*.

Michael T. Martin's two-volume anthology on New Latin American Cinema provides, above all, an extremely valuable service of 'repackaging'. All but two of the essays collected here (with the further exception of Martin's introduction) have appeared before, and most were published in the classic texts on Latin American and Third Cinema, a number of which are now sadly out of print.³ Many of the contributions have been usefully revised for this edition, however, and some have been valuably translated into English for the first time, or gathered from some quite difficult to obtain sources. Martin's edition is, on the whole, meticulously prepared, and he has not flinched from including pieces of widely differing lengths, and degrees of complexity. This is certain to become the standard anthology of writing on the subject of New Latin American Cinema. I could see nothing of significance which had been omitted from the collection: all of the major manifestos are included, and there is a sustained attempt to incorporate coverage of a very wide range of 'industrial', geographical and historical contexts, from the 1950s to the 1990s.

But there is also some slight, if understandable, historical 'repackaging' going on. After all, what precisely does it mean to entitle such a broad ranging collection *New Latin American Cinema*? In his introduction, 'The unfinished social practice of the New Latin American Cinema' included in both volumes, Martin surveys very effectively the various accounts and manifestos (most of which are reprinted in his collection) which, along with a number of films made principally in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, constituted the discursive field known as 'New Latin American Cinema' (although Martin does not quite put it like this himself). Posited by this discourse as a growing body of mainly non-'commercial' Latin American film production, arising first in Argentina, Brazil and Cuba from the late 1950s onwards, New Latin American Cinema continued to base itself on a conception of cinema as a national and pan-national 'transformational social practice' (*Volume One*, p. 18), in response to 'the deepening underdevelopment and economic and cultural dependency of the continent' (*Volume One*, p. 16). Martin himself succinctly defines this particular social practice as 'a loosely constituted, dynamic, and unfinished movement of "films of a new kind"' (*Volume One*, p. 16). Yet the organization of his two volumes points to some of the tensions inherent in quite such a 'dynamic', not to say elastic, form of historical periodization. *Volume One* successfully updates and broadens the work of earlier, largely 'historical-conceptual' anthologies, such as Michael Chanan's 1983 collection *Twenty-Five Years of New Latin American Cinema*, whose geographical coverage, like Martin's in this first volume, served primarily to display the precise 'transcontinental' nature of New Latin American Cinema discourse. But *Volume Two* embodies a comparative approach to

national cinema in Latin America and thus attempts the much more difficult task of exemplifying the ways in which New Latin American Cinema actually developed, as a (very loosely defined) transformational practice or movement, in many of the nation states of Latin America. In his introduction, Martin notes that:

the representation of national cinemas in the [second] volume is uneven. Brazil, Argentina, Cuba, and Chile are given prominence because of their importance to the formation and development of the New Latin American Cinema. Mexican cinema, because of the state's near control of film production, has tended to serve state policy rather than aesthetic programs (*Volume One*, p. 26).

There are, nonetheless, three essays on Mexican cinema in *Volume Two*.⁴ Indeed, one of the two new essays in Martin's collection, David R. Maciel's 'Serpientes y escaleras [snakes and ladders]: the contemporary cinema of Mexico, 1976–1994', presumably commissioned to fill a gap in previously available material,⁵ admirably surveys every Mexican film genre, and many of the films produced, since 1976. Yet what has this to do with a comparative investigation of New Latin American Cinema? The 'problem' of Mexico for Martin's collection seems to me to derive from the incompatibility of two different desires: the contemporary academic publisher's desire for the widest historical and geographical coverage possible of national and regional cinemas (especially of a relatively large and vibrant film industry like that of Mexico for much of the 1990s); and the desire for a meaningful and coherent conceptual and/or historical 'premiss', even in large edited anthologies such as this. It is quite difficult, at least on the evidence of many of the otherwise excellent essays in *Volume Two*, to make out what kind of cinema produced in Latin America after 1960, if any, does not 'qualify' as New Latin American Cinema for the purposes of Martin's collection.

Perhaps exploring these distinctions is not the main objective behind the selection of work for the second volume of the collection. What is clear, in any case, is that these kinds of questions about where New Latin American Cinema 'begins' or 'ends' are ones which have been addressed by critics and historians long before Martin, not least in some of the other work he reprints, especially in *Volume One*. Like Ana M. López in the final sentences of her remarkable essay 'An "other" history: the New Latin American Cinema', I am not interested in proclaiming the death of this kind of filmmaking practice. As López writes, though, New Latin American Cinema

is, for the most part, no longer necessarily a marginal cinema. But this does not mean it has given up its politics . . . what seems more important [than proclaiming its death] is to call for an

4 There are four essays on Cuba, three each on Chile and Argentina, and seven on Brazil in *Volume Two*.

5 I would, however, recommend an excellent essay published in the same year, which asks some extremely interesting and important questions of recent Mexican film production: Erica Segre, 'La desnacionalización de la pantalla' [the denationalization of the screen]: Mexican cinema in the 1990s', in Rob Rix and Roberto Rodríguez Saona (eds), *Changing Reels: Latin American Cinema Against The Odds* (Leeds: Trinity and All Saints/University of Leeds, Leeds Iberian Papers, 1997), pp. 33–57.

analysis of how it has changed, for close studies of its expressive and social strategies (*Volume One*, p. 150).

While I would wholeheartedly concur with these sentiments, and some of the essays on national cinemas in Martin's collection clearly share the goal expressed here, I note that López's confident ascription of agency to 'New Latin American Cinema', written in 1988, is a discursive move far less easily made nowadays. Beyond the anglophone academy, the place where the typology of 'New Latin American Cinema' most successfully retains its ability to stabilize the categorization of certain, highly eclectic forms of cinema from across the continent, and to assert this cinema's qualitative difference from Hollywood-dominated commercial production, is in the institutional space provided by the annual festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana, Cuba.⁶ Elsewhere in contemporary Latin America, there are far more powerful and resistant classificatory practices which, nonetheless, help to shore up some much needed space for domestic cinema production and distribution, and these are connected to auteurism and to more conventional forms of genre. These very practices, themselves evident in much of the 'marketing' discourse surrounding the more recent Havana Film Festivals, provided some of the early targets for New Latin American Cinema and Third Cinema's assaults on 'colonized' forms of film production and reception. And this situation points to some of the ironies of a once 'oppositional' cinema, both in concept and practice, which is now almost totally underwritten, not to say determined, by commercial interests. Such unfortunate ironies, it must be said, are not as thoroughly exposed as they could have been in Martin's collection of otherwise highly accomplished and extremely useful comparative historical essays.

In his book *Tropical Multiculturalism*, Robert Stam is also interested in the notion of comparative history. This time, though, rather than comparing Latin American countries and their cinemas, Stam's aim is to compare the histories of US and Brazilian racial representation in cinema and other cultural forms, while concentrating first and foremost on the South American nation. His is history on an epic scale, from the beginnings of cinema to the 1990s, a scope we have come to expect from him, given some of his earlier work, especially his collaborative projects *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, co-authored with Ella Shohat, and *Brazilian Cinema*, co-edited with Randall Johnston.⁷ The methodological approaches of the book under review have much in common with those employed by the two earlier texts. Assuming that multiculturalism is a Pan-American and worldwide phenomenon, 'Tropical Multiculturalism is based on the methodological presupposition that a shared history of

6 One of the most successful and original of the national cinema essays is on contemporary Cuban cinema: Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, 'Cuban cinema's political challenges' in Martin (ed.), *New Latin American Cinema: Volume Two*, pp. 167–90.

7 Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994); Randall Johnston and Robert Stam (eds), *Brazilian Cinema*, third edition (New York: Columbia University, 1995).

colonialism, conquest, slavery, and immigration makes it essential to study the question of ethnic ideologies and representations within the larger matrix of the ethnic ideologies and representations offered by other racially plural societies of the Americas' (p. 17). Stam's main focus is on examining Afro-Brazilian presence, usually though not exclusively by examining the actual presence of Afro-Brazilians, in the Brazilian fiction film, especially in relation to the portrayal of other groups, such as Euro or indigenous Brazilians. He writes

Within a larger relational context of co-implicated ethnicities, then, I will sketch out the outlines of a multicultural presence in Brazilian cinema, reflect on some of the issues raised by that presence, and draw some tentative conclusions within a transracial and multidisciplinary perspective. What are the dynamics of the transformations of racial imagery, and how are those transformations related to larger historical and discursive mutations? (p. 19)

One of the biggest strengths of this book, and of Stam's work in general, is its immense erudition; this study is based on a very large corpus of hundreds of films and videos, taught, curated and watched by the author over many years, and it favours, for the purposes of exemplification, films neither he nor others have written about before (pp. 19–20). While a chronological approach to the material is generally preferred, at times Stam departs from this 'to follow a theme or figure into a later period' (p. 20). The book is well illustrated with over one hundred and thirty stills.

Reproduced in isolation from the book's three hundred pages of detailed presentation of the modern history of Brazil's ethnic formations and representations, though, some of Stam's conclusions in his final chapter 'The potentials of polyphony: reflections on race and representation' seem rather obvious:

The lack of a rigid racial segregation, the fact of a *mestiço* [mixed race] population, and the ubiquity of Afro-Brazilian cultural expression, combined with the equally undeniable reality of the social powerlessness of people of color, all leave traces in the films. The challenge is to discern the structuring patterns within these traces, for films do not merely reflect social reality in an unmediated way; they inflect, stylize, caricature, allegorize (p. 329).

One of the reasons why these arguments seem quite so well-rehearsed is precisely because, as I mentioned earlier, many of the methodological insights they offer for this kind of work on ethnic representation have indeed already been set out by Stam and Shohat in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. We have, for example, a convincing argument for a more sophisticated treatment of racial stereotype in film and media (pp. 330–9), one which moves away from the notion

of 'positive' and 'negative' images. Stam also sets out once again the benefits of a much more refined handling of the production, and especially of the reception contexts of films (pp. 339–43), as well as of the filmic mise-en-scene of 'race' and Eurocentric discourses, through attention to what he calls the *rappports de force* of the audiovisual medium, 'the balance of power as it were between foreground and background' (p. 344). In the same way, the book as a whole relies on similar kinds of historical periodization as Stam's earlier individual and collaborative work on Brazilian film history. This kind of 'consistency' is certainly not a drawback per se; why should he have to come up with wholly different conceptualizations for each new study? But it is true to say that the undoubted originality of this book, and the strength of the contribution it makes to Latin American Film and Media Studies, as well as to research into ethnic representations, lies in the precise comparisons it makes and in the precise history it sets out, rather than in its methodology, or its theoretical framework. I would particularly recommend it as a companion volume for much of the recent work on ethnicity in film and media, and on 'whiteness' in particular: for example, Stam's discussion of the different cross cultural equivalencies of 'passing for white' in the final chapter (pp. 331–3), which links up with several sections on related questions throughout the book, and especially with its analysis of silent cinema. Stam's approach to questions of ethnicity in Brazilian films would repay comparison with parts of Richard Dyer's study *White*, where 'Latin' ethnic representation by Hollywood is, as Dyer himself admits, quite sketchily (although still very interestingly) treated as a form of 'liminal' identity: neither white nor black but 'in-between'.⁸ Stam's study is also highly original on matters concerning Brazilian music and ethnicity, both inside and outside of the cinema.

⁸ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997). Both Stam's and Dyer's books were published at around the same time.

The final two books reviewed here have, on the surface at least, a very similar, and much more specific relationship to questions of film and history than the other books. Both are interested, above all, in the different ways in which films themselves 'refer' to historical events or periods. Donald F. Stevens's edited collection, *Based on a True Story: Latin American History at the Movies*, has quite a literal-minded interest in these matters, while the historical references explored in Ismail Xavier's monograph, *Allegories of Underdevelopment: Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema*, are, as his title suggests, largely allegorical.

In addition to his editor's introduction, Stevens's work collects together eleven essays, almost exclusively written by historians, each of whom consider one or two feature films 'based on a true story' in relation to other 'fictional' and 'non-fictional' versions of that story. With one or two exceptions (John Mraz's essay on the representation of Cuban slavery in a number of feature films being the most notable

of these), these essays definitely work better as studies of history than as studies of the individual films. A very good example of this is Donald Stevens's own contribution to his volume on María Luisa Bemberg's 1983 costume drama *Camila* in which, after some fairly cursory discussion of the film's director, and a fleeting reference to the fact that the film was released in Argentina just after the end of the 1976–83 military dictatorship and was widely read at the time as having some allegorical connection to those events, he largely sets aside analysis of Bemberg's film and its modern production context, and prefers instead to elaborate his own account of its surface 'true story', to add to the existing historical 'records' of the nineteenth-century events on which Bemberg's film is based. These misgivings aside, Stevens's book is very well put together. Its essays, particularly those which engage in a complex treatment of the 'double-sided' way in which fiction films treat 'history', through 'direct' reference as well as through allegory (for example Mark D. Szuchman's essay on two other post-dictatorship Argentine films), will hold much interest for students of Latin American area and cultural studies, if not especially for those who seek to investigate rather more 'formal' (and less 'historical') questions regarding the medium of cinema.

Ismail Xavier's work is much more sophisticated in its dealings with the film/history connection, and is already well known to many English-language readers through the inclusion of certain of his essays in established collections on Brazilian and Latin American cinema.⁹ His aim in the anglophone version of his book is, in his own words,

to characterize, through the analysis of Brazilian films made between 1964 and 1970, [the height of Brazilian auteur cinema: Cinema Novo up to and including the beginnings of the so-called Marginal Cinema] the allegorical representation of national history and contemporary society developed by young filmmakers who deeply transformed film culture in Brazil (p. 1).

The principal films upon which Xavier practices what I consider to be model historically-informed, close analyses in this book are all examples of low-budget filmmaking,¹⁰ inspired by Italian neorealist cinema, which corresponded to Cinema Novo's search for a mode of production able at once to overcome, and to represent economic underdevelopment. Yet all of these films were made for regular theatrical exhibition, and so, as Xavier notes, can only be loosely included under the rubric of Third Cinema (and presumably under that of New Latin American Cinema, too).

Xavier's book is particularly expert at closely linking aesthetics with politics and history. The context of the cinema he examines is that of the period of 'conservative modernization', where the Left in Brazil had been defeated in the 1960s, partly because of its own

9 Parts of this book were first published in Julianne Burton (ed.), *The Social Documentary in Latin America* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990); Johnson and Stam (eds), *Brazilian Cinema*; and in John King et al. (eds), *Mediating Two Worlds*. In addition, Xavier published a related piece, 'The humiliation of the father: melodrama and Cinema Novo's critique of conservative modernization', *Screen*, vol. 38, no. 4 (1997), pp. 329–44.

10 Principally, Rocha's *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol/Black God, White Devil* (1963–4), *Terra em Transe/Land in Anguish* (1967) and *O Dragão da Maldade contra o Santo Guerreiro/Antônio das Mortes* (1969); Sganzerla's *O Bandido da luz vermelha/Red Light Bandit* (1968); Andrade's *Macunaíma* (1969); Bressane's *O Anjo nasceu/The Angel is Born* (1969) and *Matou a família e foi ao cinema/Killed the Family and Went to the Movies* (1969); and Tonacchi's *Bang Bang* (1970).

11 Fredric Jameson, 'Third world literature in the era of multinational capitalism', *Social Text*, no. 15 (Fall 1986), pp. 65–88; Aijaz Ahmad, 'Jameson's rhetoric of otherness and the "national allegory"', *Social Text*, no. 17 (Summer 1987), pp. 3–25.

splits and contradictions, and had to face 'the right-wing administration, often under the military, of a model of economic growth that excluded the majority' (p. 4). A number of Cinema Novo filmmakers responded to these conditions by becoming the 'radical heirs of a lineage of cultural nationalism born in Brazilian postindependence romanticism and deeply reworked by Brazilian modernism during the 1920s' (p. 4). Significantly, as Xavier puts it, 'their attempt to provide condensed representations of society resulted in a preference for allegory' (p. 5), in which 'the idea of nation worked as a structuring space of dramas involving the interplay of social structures and individual actions' (pp. 4–5).

In his introductory chapter, as well as throughout his book more generally, Xavier explains his position *vis-à-vis* the debates on 'national allegory' initiated by Aijaz Ahmad's 1987 response to Fredric Jameson's 1986 essay 'Third world literature in the era of multinational capitalism'.¹¹ While Xavier seems to concur with much of Ahmad's critique, his own approach attempts in addition to bring 'into view aspects of the national allegories not accounted for in Jameson's essay and [to point] out the almost simultaneous presence of a number of allegorical modes that [the North American critic] would link to different "stages of development", including the so-called postmodernity of the First World' (p. 5). Xavier also situates his own work on critical history, cultural memory and the power of allegory in relation to contemporary debates about the representation of history, which have involved authors such as Bhabha, Brennan, White, Callinicos and Sommer (p. 6).

Allegories of Underdevelopment makes an extremely important contribution to research into Brazilian and Latin American cinema, as Ana López writes, in her assessment of Xavier's book's which is reproduced on its back cover:

Whereas most studies of Latin American national cinemas or the New Latin American cinema have been excruciatingly diachronical (emphasizing the historical development of movements and slighting close analysis) or ahistorical (stringing close analysis together with little regard for historical determinants), in [this book], the close readings are intricately woven into Xavier's historical hypothesis. The historical context is present, but dynamically linked to the close readings.

Xavier's book ought, then, to be held up as a model for all who work on the cinemas of Latin America in historically informed ways, as should Stam's monumental history of race in Brazilian cinema. Yet *Allegories of Underdevelopment* also merits a much wider readership beyond that of Latin American Film Studies as one of the most sustained and detailed explorations of formal, historical and theoretical questions around allegorical representations in general that I have yet come across.

It has been one of the secondary aims of this review to draw attention, if only in passing, to some of the slight drawbacks, for a broadly defined field of Latin American Film Studies, of the continued 'repackaging' of history, wherein certain heuristic concerns, such as the need for meaningful periodization, find themselves pitched against more 'market-led' typologies, such as the desire for broad geographical and historical 'coverage'. Both Stam and Xavier's studies, neither of these exactly lacking in ambition, provide healthy antidotes to these growing tendencies. They both point up the considerable benefits of formulating over time highly original, historically-organized research questions that can lead to work of much wider significance. Whether or not their books receive the attention they deserve will, in all probability, have less to do with their intrinsic merits than with the continued, relatively marginalized status of the national cinema they discuss, at least in the anglophone academy. And how can we 'repackage' that?